

# OMEP



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## OMEPE

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Finally, OMEP Ireland would like to thank the Editorial Committee and the Editorial Associates, without whom this publication would not be possible. We would particularly like to thank our reviewers, and all those who made volume 13 possible.

## **About OMEP & OMEP Ireland World OMEP**

OMEP is an international, non-governmental, and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care. OMEP defends and promotes the rights of the child to education and care worldwide and supports activities which improve accessibility to high quality education and care. OMEP is currently established in over 60 countries and is represented at meetings of UNESCO, UNICEF, and other international organisations with similar aims. For further details on OMEP's history and its activities worldwide, see the World OMEP organisation website <http://www.worldomep.org/>

## **OMEP Ireland**

OMEP is represented in Ireland by OMEP Ireland, a registered charity dedicated to Early Education and Care (Charity No. 14213). The objective of OMEP Ireland is to use every possible means to promote the optimum conditions for the wellbeing of all children, their development, and happiness within their families, institutions, and society. OMEP assists any undertaking to improve Early Childhood Education and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

## **Mission Statement**

The mission of OMEP Ireland is to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood experiences, both because every child has a right to a high-quality childhood and because of the effect on children's future life chances. To further this mission, OMEP Ireland holds an annual research conference and publishes its journal, *An Leanbh Óg*, with the aim of supporting early childhood research and bringing it to a wider public. Its publications can also be accessed through the OMEP Ireland website <https://omepireland.ie/>

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## Editorial

**Dr. Judith Butler,**

President OMEP Ireland & Co-Editor of An Leabhbh Óg

On behalf of OMEP Ireland, I am delighted to introduce Volume 13, Issue 1., An Leabhbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies.

In November 2019, OMEP Ireland held its annual conference at Cork Institute of Technology. The conference offered high quality research sessions, review sessions, workshops, and symposia and many of the papers included in this volume emerged from the conference. The conference theme 'Relationship Matters & What Matters in Early Years Relationships' was of significance as OMEP Ireland deems relationships to be important on so many levels across the life course. Creating environments for children that promote a culture of care, a sense of belonging, and positive relationships are at the heart and soul of our professional practice and indeed, OMEP Ireland's mission.

**Dr Maeve Hurley**, PhD, MB, MRCP, founder of *Ag Éisteacht*, acted as our esteemed keynote speaker. Maeve's powerful presentation, 'Building relationships in early years settings at key moments', explored how transitions can present opportunities to build relationships with and support parents in early years settings. Maeve clearly informed the captive audience "that young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development. Early years practitioners work to provide nurturing, stimulating and reliable relationships in their settings". **Lorraine Farrell** presented the second Keynote address. Lorraine is the National Aistear Coordinator at NCCA and provided us with a superb interactive address while reminding us that the 'family wall' is significant.

We were delighted to welcome members from PLÉ, the National Association of

Higher Education Institutions offering Degree Level Training in ECEC. **Dr Mary Moloney**, the chair of PLÉ, officially launched PLÉ's *Best Practice Guidelines for Professional Practice Placement Experience in Initial Early Childhood Education and Care Professional Development*. OMEP Ireland welcomes these guidelines and applaud PLÉ for their tremendous work in this domain.

Furthermore, following a vigorous review, the 2019 OMEP Ireland Student of the Year Award was presented to **Fionnuala O' Malley**, who was nominated by **Dr Shelia Garrity**, NUI Galway. In addition, the worthy runner up, **Irena Chlumecka**, was nominated by **Sinéad McNally** of St. Patrick's Campus, Dublin University. Both papers are published in this volume of An Leabhbh Óg.

**Chloé Beatty** and **Suzanne M. Egan**'s paper highlights that a considerable amount of research has explored the effects of TV on the development of children. However, research investigating interactive screen technologies, such as touchscreen devices and smartphones, and how exposure to these affect young children's development, is still relatively scarce. The aim of this paper is to examine the prevalence and impact of screen use in early childhood, including a critique of the quality of research evidence available. Definitions of screen time, and guidelines regarding healthy screen use in early childhood, are also discussed, and may have implications for policymakers, educators, parents, and caregivers.

In their most interesting and timely paper, **Máire Corbett, Thomas Grey, Teresa Heeney, Lisha O' Sullivan**, and **Emer Ring** explain that in 2017, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) asked the Centre of Excellence for Universal Design (CEUD), at the National Disability Authority (NDA), to co-ordinate the development of Universal Design (UD) Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings. A consortium led by Early Childhood Ireland and including TrinityHaus, Trinity College Dublin, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and Nathan Somers Design was formed to develop the guidelines in collaboration with DCYA/NDA. These UD Guidelines form part of the suite of supports provided under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). The Guidelines were launched in June 2019. This paper outlines the process by which the Guidelines were developed, including the consultation element undertaken, and summarises the content of the Guidelines.

Shared Book Reading with Infants: A Review of International and National Baby Book Gifting Schemes is a most interesting paper written by **Suzanne M. Egan, Clara Hoyne, Mary Moloney, Deirdre Breatnach and Jennifer Pope**. The authors review how reading books with infants has many positive associations

with child development. However, the age at which parents begin reading with their infants, and the frequency that they read with them, is affected by many factors. This paper considers some of those factors and examines the role that baby book gifting programmes may play in supporting early shared reading practices in families. Drawing on evidence from international and local schemes in Ireland, it provides insights into the benefits and challenges of running a book gifting programme. The factors that support or hinder the success of any such initiative may therefore be useful to policy makers, local organisations, and communities in establishing, implementing, and monitoring such a scheme.

**Córa Gillic** in her article explores the use of a progression continua approach in developing practitioner pedagogical and subject content knowledge in relation to the development of spatial awareness in preschool aged children. The policy and research literature shows a focus on preschool mathematics and that spatial awareness is often overlooked in preschool mathematical provision. Findings demonstrate the potential of a learning trajectory approach as a continuing professional development tool in relation to a preschool mathematics provision.

**Anne Egan, Sarah Hodkinson, and Sheila Garrity** present a thought-provoking article on how imaginative play is beneficial to young children's development, their well-being, and allows creativity to flourish. Opportunities to engage in imaginative play at home are being reduced due to the changing nature of childhood, including increasing amounts of time in early years services. This article shares research that examined the perspectives of ten early years practitioners on the benefits of imaginative play, the adult's role in supporting this play, considering both their indoor and outdoor environments. The qualitative research design includes interviews with practitioners from services in West Cork, Ireland, and the collection of photographic data reflecting their indoor and outdoor environments. Results reveal practitioners appreciate the benefits of imaginative play, that it is well promoted in early years settings, though complex skills and knowledge are required for effective practice. However, outdoor environments were found to be underutilised for this purpose and the participating Montessori environments were less supportive of imaginative play.

**Maria Lotty's** insightful paper on Childhood Trauma in Mind: Integrating Trauma-informed Care into Early Childhood Education and Care informs that early childhood experience of trauma is highly prevalent and has far-reaching consequences. Young children are particularly vulnerable to experiencing trauma and children who enter foster care often have complex trauma related difficulties. In Ireland, many young children enter foster care each year and

services to support their recovery are chronically under resourced. Early Childhood Education and Care Professionals are located in a unique position to provide children with crucial supports that may support children's recovery and healing from trauma. This paper describes the impact of childhood trauma and how this may affect Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It further describes trauma-informed care, an approach that may support children's recovery from trauma and how it could be integrated into ECEC practices in the Irish context. The paper concludes that there is a need for trauma-informed care professional development for Early Childhood Professionals to support this.

Following on, the next paper is presented by **Mary Moloney** and relates to Standardised Testing of Young Children by Stealth: Interrogating the Implications of the International Early Learning Study. Dr Moloney posits that scientific research over the past 30 years strongly suggests that the most critical period of human development is from birth to eight years old. During this period of early childhood, learning occurs at a pace that is unrivalled at any other time in a child's development, resulting in sound physical and mental health, social and emotional competence, and cognitive skills that lay the foundations for success well into adult hood. To master these skills, children need environments that support and promote play and provide opportunities for exploration, hands-on, relevant and meaningful learning experiences (e.g., National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009); Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, (CECDE, 2006); Ministry of Education NZ, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). Early Childhood Education and Care services are considered appropriate sites that facilitate and support children's learning and development through playful learning experiences and opportunities. However, the days of learning through play may be numbered, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pilots a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes involving the testing of 5-year-old children in three participating countries –England, Estonia, and the USA. This paper explores the implications of this International Early Learning and Well-being Study (OECD, 2016), arguing that it will result in a mini PISA (International Student Assessment academic), where young children's academic achievements will take centre stage, leading to international rankings and pressure for early childhood settings to prioritise targets and outcomes, and thus become more school-like.

**Christina O' Keeffe** and **Sinéad McNally's** review paper on the Potential of Play: to Support the Development of Relationships among Young Children on the Autism Spectrum informs that play is an integral aspect of early childhood,

and the vehicle through which young children develop lifelong social interaction skills (Barnett, 2018). For pupils on the Autism Spectrum (AS), differences in social communication are compounded by challenges in accessing play opportunities (Wolfberg, Bottema-Beutel & DeWitt, 2012). Such difficulties potentially further exacerbate feelings of isolation (Hess, 2006) and may inhibit the development of social interaction skills and formation of friendships (Kasari et al., 2016). This paper argues for a renewed focus on how best to support play opportunities for young children on the AS to promote social relationships and opportunities for learning and development.

**Jane Spiteri's** thought-provoking paper focuses on the participatory research methods used in a study conducted in the field of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS), with young children (age 3 – 7 years) in Malta. It explores their perceptions of environmental sustainability and the influences upon these. Built on the belief that young children are active agents in their own lives, who hold perceptions worth exploring, this paper provides a critical reflection upon conversational interviews with children, photograph interpretation, children's drawings, children's interpretations of their drawings, the use of constructivist tools, and methodological and ethical challenges experienced during the research process.

Choosing Relationships in Times of Challenge and Change: Exploring the Experiences of Families of Young Children on the Autism Spectrum as they Navigate the Irish Early Years' Education System Together is the title of a most interesting paper by **Sarah O' Leary** and **Mary Moloney**. This paper draws upon a doctoral study and encompasses three main components: (1) changes to national policy on inclusive education in recent years, (2) research recommendations regarding inclusive practice, and (3) the primary author's lived experience of navigating the education system for her young child on the autism spectrum. It is concerned with the lived experiences of six parents of young children (aged from three to six years) on the autism spectrum as they navigate the Irish Early Years' Education system from pre-school to primary school. Recent policy changes not only impact the choices that families and educators make in relation to inclusive education, but also demand the development of positive relationships between all stakeholders involved. However, these families' experiences suggest the presence of conflicting and contradictory narratives at macro-policy level that impede the development of such relationships, resulting in the emergence of a significant gap between inclusive policy and practice. These contradictions have been created and responded to through the choices, roles and actions, of social actors within different social systems, including

families, educators. and the Government.

**Margaret R. Clark's** paper entitled *Stories of Literacy & Learning from an Early Childhood Educator* identifies the role stories can play in the learning for all children. It assesses how stories can help students to understand not only letters and sounds, but also the world in which they live. This life history project focuses on one veteran teacher, who, with over thirty years of teaching young children in an urban school district, used the power of stories to teach her students literacy skills and understand more about their world. This balanced approach to literacy highlights the how one teacher uses both instruction and care to teach her children in the current social and cultural contexts in America.

**Deirdre Breatnach's** paper explains that several universities and colleges throughout Ireland have adopted digital technologies through offering online and blended degree programmes. This paper presents the findings of staff and student evaluations regarding a blended Early Childhood degree programme, which was designed and delivered by two higher education institutions in Munster. This programme was established to allow early years educators gain a degree qualification while continuing to work in the sector. This article outlines retrospective insights on this degree, discusses the impact of this programme, and offers some suggestions for future consideration in the development of blended courses.

## **Student Paper Section:**

**Fionnuala O' Malley**, winner of the OMEP Student of the Year Award, presents her paper entitled *Promoting Inclusion in Early Years Care and Education*. Children notice differences between people very early in life (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Lindon, 2012; Hawkins, 2014), and can hold prejudices from the age of 3 (Connolly, 2007). Children are naturally curious about the world around them, however, whether prejudice emerges is influenced by many factors, including the attitudes and behaviours of the adults in their life. One such adult is the early years practitioner, who plays a crucial role in addressing prejudice and inequality during the formative stages of a child's life (DCYA, 2016a; Derman-Sparks, 2013; Murray & O' Doherty, 2001). Left unattended, prejudice can result in stereotyping, discrimination, and distress. This can negatively impact learning opportunities, wellbeing, and outcomes for children. By applying an inclusive, anti-bias practice approach, the practitioner can support every child to feel equally respected, cherished, and able to participate fully in their learning. The

anti-bias approach puts equality and diversity at the heart of the organisation and is an integral part of quality practice. This article explores the role of the practitioner in challenging prejudice and providing inclusive early education to young children. It includes a critique on the theories of how prejudice develops in children, as well as examination of best practice models, with a particular focus on the anti-bias approach, and reference to underpinning guidelines and frameworks.

In her paper, **Irena Chlumecka** clarifies that transitions in Early Childhood Education (ECE) have been receiving attention among researchers globally, however, the emphasis is stronger on the move from preschool to primary school, while transitions from home to preschool have received less attention. In recent decades, the world's population has been far from stationary and, as such, there is an increasing number of children being exposed to more than one language. This case study explored the experiences of three early childhood educators in one preschool in Ireland as they supported transitions for children with English as an additional language (EAL) into the preschool. A qualitative approach was used in gaining the educators' perspectives through face-to-face interviews and filling in a short questionnaire. The findings from this study suggest that there is a need for a more centralised, research-informed approach to children with EAL in Irish early childhood settings.

2020 has been an unprecedented year and unprecedented challenges await. OMEP Ireland continues to be instrumental in promoting, publishing, and disseminating research in relation to early childhood education and care and in doing so, continues to raise the professional profile of those working in ECEC. By continuing to publish papers, such as those included in this volume, it is our mission to stimulate conversation, discussion, and debate in relation to our work with, and on behalf of, children. We encourage all of our readers to submit a paper to be considered for inclusion in future volumes of *An Leanbh Óg*. The guidelines for authors are available in this issue and online on the OMEP Ireland website <http://www.omepireland.ie>. We share regular updates on our social media platforms and can be found on Twitter @Omeplreland and on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/OMEPIreland>.

We encourage readers to present at our annual conference. The OMEP Ireland conference is the premier forum to present and discuss progress in research, development, standards, and applications of the topics related to early childhood.

Sincere thanks to my esteemed colleagues and co-editors, **Dr Vanessa Murphy** and **Dr Frances Clerkin**, who not only made this publication possible, but also made the editing process tremendously enjoyable.

*Buíochas a ghabháil leat go léir go mór,*

**Dr Judith E. Butler**

President OMEP Ireland & Co Editor of An Leabhbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies.

June 2020.



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# Screen Time in Early Childhood: A Review of Prevalence, Evidence, and Guidelines

**Chloé Beatty & Suzanne M. Egan**

## **Abstract**

A considerable amount of research has explored the effects of TV on the development of children. However, research investigating interactive screen technologies, such as touchscreen devices and smartphones, and how exposure to these affect young children's development, is still relatively scarce. The aim of this paper is to examine the prevalence and impact of screen use in early childhood, including a critique of the quality of research evidence available. Definitions of screen time, and guidelines regarding healthy screen use in early childhood, are also discussed and may have implications for policymakers, educators, parents, and caregivers.

## **Introduction**

The advances in both new media and interactive screen technologies has allowed for the rise of a digital generation living in a digital age – a generation defined by their digital technology competence (Buckingham & Willett, 2013), and a generation that has been under-researched in this field to date. Young children and infants in this digital generation are exposed to more technologies than in the previous decade, and have more devices readily available for their use, increasing their screen time (Savina, Mills, Atwood, & Cha, 2017). This includes the use of e-books, as opposed to paper books, and the presence of more screen-based games, touchscreen devices such as iPads, and smartphones in the average household in the last decade (Savina et al., 2017). 'Screen time' is any time spent in front of a television or other screen device.

However, much of the research on screen time to date has focused on TV watching; with researchers noting its correlation with childhood obesity,

aggression, and delays in language development (Sharif & Sargent, 2006; Zimmerman, Christakis & Meltzoff, 2007; Barr, 2013). Yet, research investigating interactive screen technologies, such as touchscreen devices and smartphones, and how exposure to these affect young children's development, is still comparatively scarce (Strasburger et al., 2013). With this rise in technology use at a younger age, the main concerns for parents, educators, researchers, and policy makers alike, are: What impact are these devices having on young children's development; what is considered healthy screen use; and what screen use guidelines should be in place for parents and caregivers to support healthy development?

### **The Prevalence of Screen Time in Early Childhood**

Since the 1970s, TV watching has been of interest to researchers, with it being noted as a contributor to the rise in obesity, health risks, and inactivity in children (Quisenberry & Klasek, 1977; Gioia & Brass, 1986; Gortmaker, et al., 1996; Anderson, Economos, & Must, 2008; Peck, Scharf, Conaway, & DeBoer, 2015). As a result, screen time has since been the focus for many researchers concerned with such health risks in young children, and its potential risks to psychological development (Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007; Barr, Lauricella, Zack, & Calvert, 2010). However, since the introduction of the iPad and smartphones in households, the range of screen activities that can be carried out by young children during screen time has expanded. The possibility to engage in various activities (i.e. playing games, photo taking, video calls) on a screen device has made new technology more attractive to young children, with research noting children's interest in these devices over the last decade.

Screen time research has seen television and DVDs become increasingly rivalled by household digital devices in relation to gaining young children's interest. For example, in 2011, Australian children under the age of 5 years were spending less than 30 minutes a day on computers or touchscreen devices (Australian Government: Department of Health and Ageing, 2011). However, by 2015 this had increased to an average of 79 minutes per day on digital devices (Marsh et al., 2015). Touchscreen use by American pre-schoolers also rose from 10% daily usage to 38% between the years of 2011 to 2013 (Rideout 2011; 2013). Daily TV viewing also dropped for these children over the same time span from 79% to 63%. Additionally, Kabali et al. (2015) noted that by four years of age, 75% of American children from low socio-economic backgrounds owned a mobile phone, with most of these children using a touchscreen device before

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12 months.

Similarly, in Britain, children under 5 years of age spent an average of 69 minutes on these devices (Lauricella, Wartella, & Rideout, 2015). Bedford, Saez de Urabain, Cheung, Karmiloff-Smith, and Smith (2017) also found that 75% of British children under three had daily use of a touchscreen device, and by age 3 years only 10.5% of toddlers had no prior experience with these devices. Ofcom's 'Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes' report (2013) stated that household tablet ownership had more than doubled, from 20% to 51% in a year alone. It was also reported that while 22% of 3- to 4-year-old children in the UK had a TV in their bedroom, 25% watched TV programmes on a device other than a TV set, with 12% using these devices to go online. Watching TV on other devices rose to 30% for this age group by 2018 (Ofcom, 2018), with 20% of these children owning either a tablet or smartphone. For 5- to 7-year-olds, 44% watched TV on other devices, with ownership of these devices being 47% (Ofcom, 2018).

Early Childhood Ireland (2016) reported that 85% of Irish children under 24 months were watching over 2 hours of TV daily, and that 38% of the same children had used a mobile device. Conversely, Ipsos MRBI (2017) found Irish children in this age bracket spent on average 1 hour 15 minutes every day on screens. Drawing on the Growing Up in Ireland data, Egan and Murray (2014) reported that 3-year-olds in Ireland spent an average of 112 minutes per day watching television, with 27% watching more than 2 hours per day. They also reported that 16% of 3-year-olds had a TV, computer, or games console in their bedroom, and 85% of families had rules about screen time. By 5 years of age, 42% of Irish children in the Growing Up in Ireland study were engaging in more than two hours of screen time per day on average (inclusive of computers and touchscreen devices), with 55% engaged in less than 2 hours (Beatty & Egan, 2018; Murray, McNamara, Williams, & Smyth, 2019). This screen time mostly involved a mix of all screen activities, as opposed to solely watching TV programmes, videos, or movies or playing games (Beatty & Egan, 2020).

These international and national figures highlight how screen exposure at an early age is transitioning from watching TV to using digital devices. The reported high prevalence of touchscreens in the home provides an insight on the rise of young children's engagement with these activities. Due to the more child-friendly experience that tablets provide in comparison to traditional computers, they are becoming an increasingly popular form of learning for young children, in both the home and childcare settings (Marsh et al., 2015). With this rise in

technology use at a younger age, researchers are questioning what impact, if any, this may have on children's psychological development, and if this early exposure to screen time has a similar effect to the findings on TV viewing during early childhood.

## **The Effects of Screen Time on Early Psychological Development**

Children's psychological development takes place across multiple domains. For example, cognitive development is concerned with the child's ability to learn and utilise new information (Piaget, 1936). Measures of cognitive development include problem-solving and attentional ability, language acquisition, and overall academic achievement (Lerner, Liben & Mueller, 2015). Socio-emotional development is related to how well the child is socially and emotionally adjusted. Measures include attachment to a caregiver, how well they can make friends, and level of conflict or difficult behaviour at home or in school (Lamb & Lerner, 2015). While child development occurs across multiple domains, it is also influenced by multiple factors within a child's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). With screens now being ubiquitous in most children's home lives, it is essential that early childhood researchers examine the evidence base regarding the impact of screen use on early cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Understanding the role that screen-based technologies can play in the various aspects of children's development has become an important question for researchers, with a wide range of studies being conducted in the past few decades. In order to make sense of this diversity of research, the complexity of its findings, and use it to inform policy decisions, it is necessary to do three things. The first is to recognise the range of different meanings that might be encompassed by the idea of "screen time". The second is to separate out the kinds of activities in which children are engaged when they are partaking in screen time. And the third is to understand the differential impact of engaging in content through various screens, as well as through other media (for instance, the differences in encountering material through a screen than via a book, or face-to-face conversation). A brief review of some of the existing screen time research illustrates the diversity of screen activities and uses, and whether there are consistent conclusions that can be drawn from the findings.

Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe and McCarty (2004) examined the associations between early TV viewing and attentional disorders at age 7 years. Time spent watching TV at age 1½ and 3½ years was assessed from parent estimates, and symptoms of attention disorders were assessed at age 7 years from parental report. After controlling for parent, child, and home factors,

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Christakis et al. (2004) reported a small positive association between having symptoms of attention disorders and infant television viewing, suggesting a small negative association between TV viewing and this aspect of cognitive development. Other studies have indicated that negative associations only became apparent when children were watching more than 2 hours of television a day (Özmert, Toyran & Yurdakök, 2002; Lingineni et al., 2012; Duch, Fisher, Ensari & Harrington, 2013). However, these studies focused on the amount of time spent watching TV and did not measure the content of what the children were watching. Other research suggests that screen content may be important. For example, it has been found that early exposure to adult-directed programmes or violent content led to lower executive functioning, lower school grades, and language delays (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Linebarger & Walker, 2005; Barr, Lauricella, Zack & Calvert, 2010). These findings were not present when the children were exposed to high-quality educational cartoons, or child-directed content. Therefore, both the amount of screen time, and the content, were shown to impact on development.

Individual differences in the child or the home environment also influence the impact of screen use on development, but these are not always taken into account in screen time research. Kostyrka-Allchorne, Cooper, and Simpson (2017) conducted a systematic literature review of television exposure and its impact on children's development and behaviour. Their review combined cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies in the area from 1977 to 2015. Interestingly, negative associations between screen time and cognitive development were mostly found in high-risk children, or children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for children under the age of 2 years. For older children, in studies with a representative sample, there were an equal amount of studies indicating no association or a positive association for cognitive development, as there were studies suggesting television exposure had a negative effect.

These studies highlight the complexity of interpreting screen time research as screen time, screen content, and individual and environmental factors all potentially play a role in child development. Another factor that also seems to have an influence is the screen activity. For example, a meta-analysis of popular types of computer games found that those who play action and adventure games have higher spatial awareness, attention, multi-tasking, and perceptual abilities, than those who play puzzle games, due to the bringing together of sensory, perceptual, and cognitive functions needed to succeed in high-action computer games (Spence & Feng, 2010). Neumann (2018) also noted higher

literacy outcomes during screen use when children used apps that encouraged the child to interact physically with the material, in comparison to apps that did not encourage physical interaction.

Furthermore, Beatty and Egan (2018) reported that in an Irish sample of 5-year-olds (drawn from the Growing Up in Ireland study) that screen activity, but not screen time, had an effect on language development. When comparing computer games, educational games, and TV watching, they found that computer games had more of a negative association with vocabulary development for these 5-year-olds. However, the amount of screen time by itself did not impact the children's vocabulary scores. Yet, using the same sample, Beatty and Egan (2020) found no association between computer games and non-verbal reasoning. For non-verbal reasoning it seems that lower scores were associated with educational games. Similarly, Hinkley, Brown, Carson, and Teychenne (2018) explored the differing effects various screen activities had on social skills. They found that poorer social skills were only associated with high levels of TV watching, whereas video games and hand-held game use were not associated with any of the social skills scales.

The studies described above provide only a brief snapshot of some of the many research studies that have investigated screen time. However, the mixed findings from these studies illustrate how difficult it is to interpret screen time research and to draw implications from it for policy or practice. It is also important to note that the effect sizes in many screen time studies are small, and so results should be interpreted with caution. The social and cognitive differences between TV watching and other types of screen use have been noted by previous researchers (e.g., Hinkley et al., 2018). For example, video chat allows for social interactions and conversations to take place with family members, and video games often prompt children to respond and interact with characters. Interactions with others may also take place during multi-player games, which encourage behaviours such as turn taking and prosocial behaviour (Hinkley et al, 2018). Playing games, of any type, is also an essential part of childhood, and video games as an example of this have been shown to be associated with more positive outcomes than TV watching, such as positive behaviour towards peers, problem-solving, and activity involvement (Durkin & Barber, 2002).

Nonetheless, video game research that promotes the various cognitive benefits associated with playing these games may have flaws in their research design or methodology. For example, Spence and Feng (2010) note that the individuals who engage in action games may do so because of their previously existing superior

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spatial, perceptual, and attentional abilities, making such games an attractive pastime. Determining the causal links between screen use and development can thus be challenging. This makes the inclusion of randomised testing, or pre- and post-testing, imperative for drawing conclusions on contemporary screen activities' effect. However, studies that do include randomised pre- and post-testing tend to have smaller sample sizes due to the complexity and longitudinal nature of the study (e.g., Neumann, 2018). Therefore, studies with observed associations between screen activities and improved cognitive skills should also be interpreted with caution, due to these possible design or methodological issues.

Screen time research has also been critiqued by some researchers who have found conflicting results on the impact of screen time on early development through replication studies. While the research on television watching has outlined the negative impact it has on cognitive development, these findings have not been replicated in all samples (Obel, Henriksen & Dalsgaard, 2004). Additionally, many studies do not account for other factors that may have an impact on child cognitive development such as poverty status or maternal skills (Foster & Watkins, 2010). These concerns have also been mentioned in the socio-emotional research that shows the negative impacts of screen use, with small effect sizes and the lack of inclusion of environmental factors being outlined as methodological issues in the literature (Elson & Ferguson, 2014; Bell, Bishop, & Przybylski, 2015).

The findings described above, relating both to cognitive development and socio-emotional development in early childhood, highlight the complexity of interpreting the results of screen use research. Screen use in early childhood varies considerably from child to child in a number of different ways, such as the amount of time spent on a screen activity, the type of activity, and whether or not a caregiver is engaged in the activity also. Further consideration of definitions of 'screen time' are therefore warranted.

## **Screen Time Definitions and Guidelines**

In 2011, the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) defined media as "television programs, pre-recorded videos, web-based programming, and DVDs viewed on either traditional or new screen technologies" (Brown, 2011, pp. 1041). In this same report, the AAP released strong recommendations against screen time for children under 24 months as no cognitive benefits of screen time were found in the literature for this age bracket. By 2013, the emphasis of television screen time was removed and replaced with cell phones, iPads, and social media sites,

which the AAP referred to as 'new media'.

In their 2016 statement, the AAP revised their recommendation for no screen time for children under 24 months. The definition of screen time was further expanded from TV and other types of screen devices, to also include e-books, video calls, and co-operative educational e-games (McClure, Chentsova-Dutton, Barr, Holochwost, & Parrott, 2015). The decision to discontinue the recommendation of no screen time for children under the age of 2 years came from the acknowledgement that screen time, via new media and technologies, may have various learning and social outcome benefits in comparison to TV watching. However, the AAP provided tips in 2018 to guide parents on the rise in technology use by young children. Here, they emphasised the importance of co-viewing and co-playing during screen use to create bonds and conversations and moved away from strict time limitations.

Similar to the changing recommendations from the AAP, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) in the UK, have also recommended moving away from setting strict time limits in their own guidelines. In the guide, 'The health impacts of screen time: a guide for clinicians and parents' (RCPCH, 2019), it is noted that "more and better research" is needed before conclusions are drawn on screen time's impact on early development. Due to the lack of a strong evidence base in the current screen time research the guidelines recommend that rather than setting limits on screen time, that screen time is discussed with families. Inviting parents to think about their own screen use, whether there are rules set on screen time and content, and whether they are protecting sleep and face-to-face interactions, are all outlined in these recommendations.

Since the introduction of these technologies, further classifications of screen time have been created to aid researchers in analysing the varying effects different types of screen time exposure may have, as opposed to generalising the findings of TV watching to all types of screen engagement. An example of this is the characterisation of screen time as 'Passive' or 'Active', as suggested by Sweetser, Johnson, Ozdowska and Wyeth (2012). This allows for more active types of screen activities, such as playing educational games or doing homework online, to be considered differently for early development than passive content viewing. As developmental theorist Piaget (1936) suggested, children develop cognitively by exploring and interacting with their world. Therefore, integrating Sweetser et al.'s classification of active and passive screen time activities into current research in the field may be useful.

A further model that has been put forward considers the 'Content', 'Context',



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and 'Connections' of screen time (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). This model places an emphasis on assessing whether the content is of high quality, and whether connections are being made with either friends or family members during screen time. It also encourages researchers to look at children's screen use in light of their environmental context (e.g., socio-economic background, mother's education, and whether siblings are present) before interpreting its effect on early development. These classifications focus on the differentiations of screen time, and the external factors that influence developmental outcomes when children engage in screen-based activities. This is perhaps the most important movement in this area of research to date, as it moves away from the idea of measuring just the amount of time a child spends on a screen to considering multiple variables involved in screen use to understand its impact on child development.

'Modelling' and 'Involving' are two further recommended approaches by Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2016) for parents to use with children during screen time. While there is a wide range of ways for children to learn from digital technology use, parents tend to underestimate their role in demonstration, guided interaction, and family practices (Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2008). As noted by Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2016), involving children during screen use creates more opportunity for talk time, and interactions between parent and child. Co-viewing television programmes, for example, allows for shared experiences and discussions, the stimulation of questions and curiosity, and the development of imagination through character identification and role play.

The presence of an adult to scaffold the child's learning makes parent-child interaction an aspect of screen time engagement for young children's development. These ideas also relate to scaffolded learning, a term coined by Cognitive Psychologist Bruner (1996), based on the theories of developmental theorist Vygotsky's (1978), which suggests the importance of such learning for early cognitive development. These models proposed by Sweetser et al. (2012) and Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2016), therefore, provide useful expansions of classification systems for screen time, to move beyond just considering how much time is spent on a screen.

## **Screen Time Guidelines in Ireland**

Currently, in Ireland, there are no official governmental guidelines on screen time for young children. The Health Service Executive (HSE; 2018) currently states that while excessive amounts of screen time can contribute to poorer cognitive skills and sleep issues, more interactive screen activities may also have

possible benefits, providing parents follow the suggested recommendations. These recommendations include monitoring the content the child is viewing and getting involved during screen time by talking about programmes and games and encouraging questions. Parents are also encouraged to model good screen use habits and create screen-free zones in the home, for example, at the dinner table.

In addition to the HSE guidelines, CyberSafe Ireland (2019), a charity organisation, recommends assessing the quality of screen time rather than just the quantity. It similarly encourages parental engagement during screen use to aid the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills through co-operative play. These recommendations appear compatible with the suggestions of Sweetser et al., (2012) and Blum-Ross, and Livingstone (2016), by highlighting the importance of the quality of the screen time as opposed to just the amount of screen time. The current screen time research also supports the advice put forward by the HSE and CyberSafe Ireland, with researchers advising that screen use should be engaged with by both an adult and the child, to facilitate the best outcomes for social interactions and the learning process (Richert, Robb, Fender, & Wartella, 2010; Brown, 2011). Parent-child interactions during screen time are also important to promote positive screen use behaviours for children (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). Taken together, the literature creates a strong argument for the necessity of measuring the screen content, context of play, and adult engagement during screen time, while also considering the various findings of recent screen time research. One of the priorities of the 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, p. xii) is to promote positive influences for childhood. The policy framework notes that 'rapidly evolving forms of digital media are featuring more and more in our children's lives'. To add to the current screen time advice available, the authors suggest that parents, researchers, and policy makers consider the ten questions below when comparing across research studies or deciding on healthy screen use for an individual child, or family. These questions are drawn from current guidelines and derived from existing research findings:

- How much screen time is the child engaged in?
- What type of screen activity is the child engaged in?
- Does the activity encourage child engagement (is it passive or active)?
- What type of content is the child engaged with?

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- Is a caregiver present with the child during screen use?
  - Is the caregiver modelling healthy screen use behaviour?
  - Has previous research shown that the activity has an impact on child development?
  - If previous research has shown an impact, how big is that impact?
  - Does the screen use have a noticeable negative impact on the child or on family life?
  - Does the screen use have a noticeable positive impact on the child or on family life?

The Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' National Policy Framework also; seeks to better understand and respond to the increasing influences on childhood of new technologies, digital media...to ensure that children, young people, parents and society in general are best equipped to respond to these influences (p. xii).

Consideration of the various aspects of screen use which may impact on child development (e.g., screen time, content, activity), as assessed through the questions outlined, will support parents and policy makers in taking an evidence based approach to decisions about screen time in early childhood. We suggest that the final four questions about the impact of the screen use on development are particularly important to consider (i.e., relating to the research evidence base, the size of the effect and whether it has a noticeable impact on an individual child or family).

## **Conclusion**

Due to the high level of variation between screen activities in relation to features, scaffolding opportunities, portability, and interactivity, it is no longer possible to consider the singular effect of all screen types on the developing child. Recent research in the field suggests that the quality of the content, parental engagement and monitoring, and the inclusion of interactive elements are all factors that influence the effect screen use has on early development, in addition to the amount of time spent on the screen. This is in line with the current HSE and CyberSafe Ireland guidelines, which both encourage parents to use digital devices jointly with their children while modelling responsible media use. Research findings suggesting positive or negative effects of screen time on

children's cognitive and socio-emotional development are mixed, and often have small effects or small sample sizes, and are dependent on the particular aspect of development being investigated. This creates difficulties in interpreting the research findings, and determining what effect screen use has on development, if any. The issues with interpreting current screen time findings highlight the necessity of a strong evidence base before creating policies relating to children's screen use. Ideally, the evidence base would include multiple types of screen use, examined across multiple aspects of development, and also control for external factors such as the child's home learning environment, attachment with a caregiver, and mother's education level, and involve large sample sizes. As research studies catch up with the recent advances in technology, the impact of new technologies on child development will become clearer. However, depending on the rate of technological change over the coming decade, research findings may continue to lag behind the latest screen uses for a number of years to come. The factors that influence the impact of screen use on child development, and the quality of the evidence base investigating these factors, should all be considered by parents, educators, researchers, and policy makers before drawing conclusions regarding the impact of screen use on development in early childhood.

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# Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care settings

**Máire Corbett, Thomas Grey, Teresa Heeney, Lisha O' Sullivan, & Emer Ring**

## **Abstract**

In 2017, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) asked the Centre of Excellence for Universal Design (CEUD), at the National Disability Authority (NDA), to co-ordinate the development of Universal Design (UD) Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings. A consortium led by Early Childhood Ireland, and including TrinityHaus, Trinity College Dublin, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and Nathan Somers Design, was formed to develop the guidelines in collaboration with DCYA/ NDA. These UD Guidelines form part of the suite of supports provided under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). The Guidelines were launched in June 2019. This paper outlines the process by which the Guidelines were developed, including the consultation element undertaken, and summarises the content of the Guidelines.

## **Background and Context**

The launch of the 'Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education' by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2016), saw a major step forward for inclusive early learning and care in Ireland. According to the DCYA, the aim of the charter and guidelines is "...to support and empower those working in the sector to explore, understand and develop inclusive practices for the benefit of children, their families and wider society" and to promote "...the values of diversity, equality and inclusion for all children attending early childhood services". The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports, introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2016, to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Universal Preschool provision known as the Early Childhood Care and Education

(ECCE) scheme. Its goal is to empower practitioners to deliver inclusive early-years' experiences, ensuring every eligible child can meaningfully participate in the ECCE scheme and reap the benefits of quality early learning and care. It is a child-centred model, with seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the needs of the child and the pre-school setting (see figure 1). For many children, the universal supports offered under the model are sufficient. For others, more targeted support may be needed. The model is designed to be responsive to the needs of each individual child in the context of their pre-school setting. It offers tailored, practical supports based on need and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability (DCYA, 2020).

**Figure 1. A Model to Support Access to the ECCE scheme for children with a disability (AIM 2020)**



The Universal Design Guidelines were developed in support of Level 1 (An inclusive Culture) and Level 5 (Equipment, Appliances and Minor Alterations grant) as in Figure 1 (above). The purpose of the publication is to support the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector in creating universally designed spaces for all stakeholders (including children, staff, and parents). It will also be useful for built environment design professionals in private and public sectors working on retrofitting existing settings as well as to the development of larger scale projects.

## Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care settings

Universal Design (UD) is defined as: the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. This includes public places in the built environment such as buildings, streets or spaces that the public have access to, products and services provided in those places, and systems that are available including Information Communications Technology (ICT). (Centre of excellence in Universal Design/National Disability Authority 2018)

The Universal Design Guidelines were devised following a comprehensive national and international literature review, the compiling of ten case studies of ELC settings across the country, the development of a self-audit tool and two workshops involving early childhood experts and other relevant stakeholders such as built environment professionals (i.e. architects, landscape architects, planners, engineers) and officials from Government Departments and local authorities, among others. The overall objectives were to develop Universal Design Guidelines and a self-audit tool for ELC settings to:

- Support the sector in creating inclusive ELC settings for all stakeholders, particularly children with a disability;
- Enable better designs of newly-built ELC settings and give clear and detailed information on the retro-fit of existing early years settings, buildings and spaces; and
- Enable ELC practitioners to carry out self-audits of their settings, so they can identify steps to be taken to ensure all stakeholders can participate.

These guidelines and self-audit tool can be used by all Tusla-registered ELC settings and home-based childminders (whether registered with Tusla or not) in Ireland. Many ELC settings also provide services for school-aged children and while there is reference to this specific age range, the main guidance relates to settings for children under six years. The CEUD/NDA have previously developed a guide for Universal Design Homes in Ireland and these also inform the ELC guidelines. It should be noted that the Universal Design Guidelines are not statutory requirements. The material in the Guidelines is mediated at five levels of cost, ranging from minor alterations such as signage, painting, artwork or planting to larger scale projects, involving assistive technology, right up to a

major retro fitting project or green field site new build.

## Scoping the SUD Guidelines

An initial scoping exercise was undertaken to identify what aspects of the built environment were relevant to the brief given. It was decided to use relevant Síolta standards to inform the structure of the UD Guidelines. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, is underpinned by twelve principles and sixteen standards which define quality practice. The breadth of the Síolta principles and standards is very wide and for the purposes of the development of the Universal Design Guidelines approach, it was agreed to focus on seven standards, namely:

- Standard One: Rights of the Child
- Standard Two: Environments
- Standard Three: Parents and Families
- Standard Five: Interactions
- Standard Six: Play
- Standard Eleven: Professional Practice
- Standard Sixteen: Community Involvement.

Síolta acknowledges that the quality standards are inextricably linked, and the framework is designed to encourage cross-referencing between individual standards (CECDE, 2006). Consequently, while all standards are not explicitly addressed, a review of Key Pedagogical and Care Issues for Early Years Settings to inform the development of the UD Guidelines is aligned with the definition of quality presented across all standards. The seven selected Standards reflect the European Key Principles of a Quality Framework (2014). The European Framework says: In all Member States the following transversal issues are fundamental to the development and maintenance of high quality ECEC and underpin each statement in this proposal: a clear image and voice of the child and childhood should be valued, parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential a shared understanding of quality.

The key elements in the European Framework that link to the Universal Design Guidelines for ELC settings are:

- Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.

- Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.
- A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), similarly, has twelve underpinning principles, presented in three groups. Of key relevance to the development of the UD guidelines are the Principles of the child's uniqueness, equality and diversity, and children as citizens. These principles intersect with Síolta and the European Principles in the areas of Environments, Play, Equality and Diversity, and Parents Family and Community. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) links the Principles of Síolta and Aistear in the Curriculum Foundations section ([www.aistearsiolta.ie](http://www.aistearsiolta.ie)) to support practitioners to use Aistear and Síolta together. First 5, The Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Families (2018), further strengthens the recognition that the quality of the ELC environment has a key influence on the overall quality experience of the young children and families who use the setting.

## Case Study Process

A key part of the development of the Guidelines was the case study visits. These case studies provided data, which, along with the Literature Review, formed the basis for the guidelines, ensuring their relevance for the ELC sector. The team of Early Childhood Specialists in Early Childhood Ireland identified settings with whom they had worked, on a variety of quality initiatives such as the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, Aistear in Action or the National Aistear Síolta initiative. A typology was developed to aid selection, with the following criteria:

- Geographical location
- Setting type (Sessional/ Full Day Care/ Part-time)
- Local context (rural/ urban/ suburban)
- Setting size (fewer than 20 children, 20-60 children, over 60 children)
- Building type (purpose-built, converted, single storey, multi storey)
- Facilities for outdoor play.
- Other: for example, settings that are part of a chain/ workplace settings/ Naíonraí/ based in Primary School/ settings in modular buildings.
- The selection, to ensure balanced representation (e.g. of rural and

urban settings) was also informed by data from the Pobal Early Years Sector Profile (2016/2017)

Following this process, the ten settings were identified. They were based all over Ireland, represented sessional and full-day-care settings, community and privately owned/operated, purpose built and converted, and also single/multi storey. The settings numbers ranged in size from 14 children to 105 children. All had outdoor areas.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Each of the selected settings was invited to participate. Prior to agreeing to be involved, a comprehensive selection of pre-visit materials was developed to ensure informed consent (Mac Naughton et al., 2004:65) on the part of all participants. The materials included briefing leaflets for the children, the owners/managers, the practitioners in the settings, and the parents. These briefing materials outline, in an accessible manner, the purpose of the visits and what the researchers would be doing on each visit. Having read the materials, and had the opportunity to ask questions, a range of consents were required to be signed. These included consents for the visits to take place, for stakeholders to complete a survey, to be interviewed, to be photographed, and for children themselves to take photographs. On the visits, children's assent was also sought. This was to ensure that everyone taking part was fully briefed and happy with the level of involvement to which they chose to commit. All requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) were complied with, including retention periods for the survey and interview material and the use of images.

## **The Process**

Thomas Grey, Research Fellow from TrinityHaus, and Máire Corbett, Early Childhood Specialist from Early Childhood Ireland, conducted the Case Study visits in May/June 2018. Prior to each visit, surveys were sent to each setting for a representative sample of practitioners and parents to complete. On each visit the built environment was observed. Children, staff, and parents were spoken with and interviews were carried out with a number of parents and practitioners. Children were invited to take photos of the part of the environment that they liked best. Following the visits, the surveys and interviews were analysed and the findings used to inform the guidelines. The research examined the built environment of the ELC setting across the following spatial scales:

- The approach and entrance to the setting (including key site design features)

- Internal built environment including horizontal and vertical circulation, key internal spaces, and elements and systems (i.e. materials and finishes, fit-out elements, internal environment, and technology, etc.)
- External play areas.

## Key Case Study Findings:

While all ten settings were compliant with the 2016 Early Years Regulations, all settings said that they would like more space, especially indoors: space for children, staff, parents, and storage. In two settings parent rooms were no longer being used for that purpose, due to pressure on space. In some cases, narrow front doors made entering/exiting difficult for wider buggies or wheelchairs. All settings had an outdoor area, but in some of the urban settings, it was quite small and had few natural features. In some of the settings, the children had little or no opportunity to be challenged physically, and to explore risk. This was highlighted by parents as well as practitioners.

Signage (or the lack of) was commented on by some parents. This was especially so in full-day-care settings and applied to grandparents or other people collecting children, when it was not clear where the room they were looking for was, or what a name meant. For example, a room called *Bunnies* does not make it clear to what group of children it may relate.

Shelter and access were problematic in some cases. Some people found parking limited and the challenges of making it through a doorway, with perhaps a baby in a car seat, a toddler by the hand, and a few bags were also expressed. These challenges were exacerbated if there was no shelter at the door.

## Literature Review

The literature review was conducted by Mary Immaculate College and Trinity Haus in tandem with the case study visits, and examined evidence-based research regarding best practice in early childhood education and care and Universal Design. It synthesised the findings and provided key recommendations to underpin the guidelines and self-audit tool. The literature review focused on two key areas related to a UD approach for ELC settings, which include firstly, the key pedagogical and care issues for settings that inform the overall UD approach, and secondly, the key built environment issues that underpin a UD environment which is accessible, usable, and easily understood by children, staff, and family members.

For both focus areas, the following methodology was adopted:

- A two-strand approach to the literature review that included an empirical strand and an expert strand.
- Literature search criteria based on key search terms and exclusion criteria.
- A synthesis of the literature organised as categories in two different chapters: focusing on the key pedagogical and care issues and on the key built environment issues. In the first case, these categories are based on the Síolta standards, while in the second the key built environment issues are categorised according to key spatial scales.

## Consultation throughout the Development of the Guidelines

A number of advisory group meetings were held at key points in the process. These meetings were attended by a multi-disciplinary group from the fields of architecture, planning, and early childhood education and care, Early Years Inspectors, Government Departments as well as parents. Two stakeholder workshops were also held; one in Cork, with a group of ELC practitioners, to give feedback on the Self-Audit tool, and one in Dublin, with a large group of people, ranging from representatives from Local Authorities, Disability Groups, Occupational Therapists, Architects, and the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

Design and spatial requirements framed by key Síolta standards

As mentioned earlier, the UD Guidelines are framed under relevant Síolta standards, illustrated below.



**Figure 2. Síolta Standards Guiding the Literature Review (Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings)**



Using these Síolta Standards, the literature review was conducted to investigate and draw out the main implications for the ELC built environment. The following sections present some of the main design considerations for each standard. These considerations are discussed in line with each selected standard, but it is acknowledged that there may be an overlap between many of these spaces. The extent to which settings can provide for these aspects will depend on the existing environment but with increased awareness, some changes may be possible.

### **Standard 1: Rights of the Child**

Children's rights as citizens are enabled by ensuring settings are well connected to the community so children are socially, culturally, and artistically engaged in a meaningful way, have spaces, materials, and displays that are relevant to and based on the child's interests, and that all children's voices are represented and can be freely expressed through a range of media.

### **Standard 3: The Child and Parents and Families**

Settings should be welcoming spaces for parents/families by providing accessible, comfortable spaces where families can communicate and build relationships. These should reflect the diversity of parents/families. Make curriculum visible through the organisation of space and materials. Ideally, the space can accommodate families including extended families for specific occasions.

### **Standard 5: The Child and Interactions**

Create spaces and position resources to maximise children's exploration, talking, listening, and engagement in play and learning. Provide quiet spaces (indoor and outdoor) where adults can connect with children, children can connect with each other, or simply be on their own. Place key learning provocations in central spaces, at child level, so children can access and interact with materials and each other, supporting inquiry-based learning. Modify or remove any environmental stimuli that contribute to children's anxiety (for example, some children are sensitive to particular sounds, smells, or bright lights).

### **Standard 6: The Child and Play**

Ensure there is adequate indoor and outdoor space for children to play. These spaces must be accessible, usable, easily understood and create a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor areas. Consider covered outdoor areas

that allow children play or just be outside during inclement weather. These spaces also facilitate children, family members or staff with physical, sensory or cognitive needs, who might need additional shelter outdoors. Provide a range of spaces and materials to stimulate children's interests, promote communication, and encourage problem-solving and critical thinking along with materials that support children's identity and belonging. Ensure resources support physical, object, symbolic, pretend play and games with rules both indoors and outdoors. Provide an environment that supports children to easily transition between activities. Consider the benefits of children engaging with the natural world with sensory garden space. Construct spaces for exploring and investigating; mystery and enchantment; imagination; movement and stillness; interacting socially; moving freely and risk-taking within a safe context.

### **Standard 11: The Child and Professional Practice**

Provide spaces that support the role of adult-child interactions in supporting children's learning and development. Encourage a culture of reflection by allocating space for practitioners to discuss and reflect. Provide a flexible environment in terms of space and materials that acknowledges the role of the practitioner as environmental planner and evaluator.

### **Standard 16: The Child and Community Involvement**

Settings should be well connected and integrated with the community. Promote the visibility of the setting in the community through carefully designed boundaries, transition spaces, and prominent signage. Shared spaces that integrate with the locality, along with displays and materials that capture local diversity enhance the visibility of the setting. Make children's expression visible through, for example, displays of children's artwork at local community spaces.

### **Outline of the Guidelines**

The following sections feature in the Guidelines and promote a welcoming, inclusive environment that is accessible, understandable, and easy to use. The built environment must be accessible, usable, and easily understood across the full spectrum of spaces to ensure a continuous 'travel chain' for users of all ages, sizes, abilities, and disabilities. The setting should be considered holistically when taking account of the identified Síolta Standards and the need for positive connection with the community. Most importantly, however the ELC setting is a dedicated child-centred environment and this should be reflected in the setting. While this will differ from one context to another, the setting must facilitate the

primary needs of children including play; exploring, enchantment; imagination; movement, stillness; interacting socially; moving freely and risk-taking within a safe context.

### **Site Location, Approach, Entry, and Design:**

The environment that surrounds the setting is critical to the UD approach. This is important in terms of accessibility, usability, and ease of understanding, but it also helps to create welcoming, inclusive settings that are well connected and ensure children are socially, culturally, and artistically engaged with the community. It influences how well settings are integrated and visible with the community, and how well they enable and enhance community involvement. A typical setting has diverse users of different ages, sizes, and abilities. These may be arriving on foot, using a wheelchair, with buggies, on bicycles, or by private car. The setting must provide appropriate pedestrian access and cycling facilities, as well as parking and set-down points that are accessible, understandable, and easy to use for all users. The site layout establishes the overall design quality by determining the onsite location and spatial configuration of external and internal spaces. The site layout underpins the quality of the various spaces as identified in Síolta, including the dedicated child spaces, spaces for families and staff to interact, or staff specific spaces.

### **Entering and Moving Around the Setting:**

Enabling a diverse set of users to comfortably enter and easily circulate within a setting is a basic requirement. This involves accessible horizontal (corridors and hallways) and vertical (stairs and lifts) circulation routes for people of all ages, sizes, and abilities. A setting must perform well as a welcoming, spacious environment that is comfortable during peak drop-off or pick-up times, while accommodating parents, grandparents, child-minders, younger siblings, buggies, baby-bags, and the various accoutrements that are part of family life.

### **Key Internal and External Spaces:**

The Síolta Standards identify the range and type of spaces required with a successful setting. These include:

- Child-centred spaces to support play, movement, interaction and dialogue with peers and adults, investigation, challenge, and variety of group and individual experiences. The spaces should provide a range of learning provocations and mirror home-like conditions that enable socialisation, such as shared mealtimes.

- Outdoor spaces that provide the conditions listed above, and provide a connection with nature. There should be good connectivity between indoor and outdoor spaces. Covered or sheltered outdoor spaces provide both a transition space and shelter during inclement weather, or for individuals who may require additional protection from the elements.

## **Spaces for families or carers to interact with each other and with staff.**

### **Elements and Systems:**

The fittings, fixtures, finishes, and furnishings that are in the spaces outlined above should mirror the principles of a democratic pedagogy, and reflect the identified interests and voice of the child, along with the diversity of the families and wider community. Assistive technology can remove barriers within the setting. Technology can also play an important role regarding sensory stimulation and learning support. The internal environment is largely determined by natural and artificial lighting conditions, thermal comfort and indoor air quality, and acoustic conditions. The fittings, fixtures, finishes, and furnishings referred to above impact on the quality of these environmental conditions and must be carefully considered in a UD ELC setting. People will experience these conditions very differently depending on their age, ability or disability, physical activity levels, or health condition. Therefore, careful specification of building components is required to ensure the setting is accessible, understandable and easily used by a diverse set of users.

### **The Self-Audit Tool:**

The purpose of the Self-Audit tool is to enable practitioners, architects, and others to assess the ELC setting to evaluate how UD principles are being used and plan for improvements. There are key aspects listed and those completing it can leave out criteria not relevant to their setting (for example sleep spaces in a sessional setting). The order of criteria in the self-audit tool mirrors that of the Guidelines. It encourages reflection and promotes planning to ensure the ELC environment is easy to access, use, and understand.



# 1. Site Location, approach, entry and design

Consider and consult all users. Criteria in red (E) are classed as Essential. Criteria in blue (R) are classed as Recommended.

| Site of the setting |   | 0<br>criteria<br>not met | 1<br>criteria<br>partially<br>met | 2<br>criteria<br>fully met | NA                       |
|---------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1                   | The site is easily accessed by all users. (E)                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2                   | Pathways are sufficiently wide, smooth and well maintained. (E)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3                   | Planting is low level so it does not block light or pathways. (R) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4                   | There is external lighting. (E)                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Figure 3. Example from UD Self-audit tool

## Conclusion

The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016) calls for settings to challenge and promote the individual child's abilities and development. In the discussion of the Síolta Standards, the importance of diverse spaces, interactions and learning provocations was highlighted. These issues challenge the built environment to provide an appropriate level of challenge or difficulty for one set of needs or abilities (e.g. a three- year-old who needs to climb and jump), while also ensuring an inclusive approach for all children (a child who uses a wheelchair). The UD approach offers an integrated understanding of design that includes a UD philosophy, the UD principles, a UD process, and the concept of personalisation. This UD philosophy proposes that people should be enabled

to participate in a society that takes account of human difference and should be able to interact with their environment to the best of their ability. The UD process promotes participatory and collaborative design that not only works with users to understand and incorporate their needs and preferences, but also involves them in the design process in a meaningful manner.

Through understanding user needs, and acknowledging the diversity of building occupants that UD must cater for, a personalised approach can be facilitated to support inclusive child development and the challenge and learning provocations discussed above, as well as the specific needs of staff and family members, and other visitors. Using the UD ELC Guidelines will enable settings to progressively ensure that all ELC settings are easy to access, understand, and use, as the UD philosophy outlines and will mean that an inclusive culture (AIM level 1) permeates all ELC settings. The entire suite of Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings can be found at <https://aim.gov.ie/universal-design-guidelines-for-elc-settings/> and this consists of the Literature Review, the Self-Audit Tool and the Guidelines.

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# Shared Book Reading with Infants: A Review of International and National Baby Book Gifting Schemes

**Suzanne M. Egan, Clara Hoyne, Mary Moloney, Deirdre Breatnach, & Jennifer Pope**

## **Abstract**

Reading books with infants has many positive associations with child development. However, the age at which parents begin reading with their infants, and the frequency that they read with them, is affected by many factors. This paper considers some of those factors and examines the role baby book gifting programmes may play in supporting early shared reading practices in families. Drawing on evidence from international and local schemes in Ireland, it provides insights into the benefits and challenges of running a book gifting programme. The factors that support or hinder the success of any such initiative may therefore be useful to policy makers, local organisations, and communities in establishing, implementing, and monitoring such a scheme.

## **Introduction**

National and international research indicates that reading books with young children has many positive associations with multiple aspects of cognitive and socio-emotional development (see Hoyne & Egan, 2019, for a review). Moreover, when parents read with their young child, there are positive outcomes for language growth and reading achievement (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995), and children who are read to at an early age score higher on language measures (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). Reading picture books to young children is believed to support language and literacy skills and vocabulary development in early childhood (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Morgan & Meier, 2008), with the vocabulary of 3-year-old children associated with the frequency of shared book

reading at home (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy & Cook, 2009).

In addition to supporting the development of language skills, reading with young children supports other aspects of development, including cognitive development (Kuo, Franke, Regalado, & Halfon, 2004), as well as long term benefits that aid the transition to school, with benefits continuing through to at least the age of 10 -11 (Kalb & van Ours, 2014). Early reading to infants has potential not only for future cognitive development, but also for aspects of current cognitive development, such as problem solving in an infant's first year (Murray & Egan, 2014), with regular reading supporting the development of strong social and emotional skills in early childhood (Baker, 2013).

Furthermore, because reading is an interactive activity, it promotes overall socio-emotional development (Kuo, Franke, Regalado & Halfon, 2004), including peer relationships and self-esteem (Duursma, Augustyn & Zuckerman, 2008). While Ninio & Bruner (1978) suggest that joint book reading by parent and child also mimics the turn-taking structure of conversation, Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek, (2012) indicate that shared reading in early childhood can establish positive interaction patterns that foster language and emotional bonds between child and adult.

Although reading with infants and young children results in improved early reading success and long-term, positive effects across many domains of development (Moore & Wade, 2003; Dickinson et al., 2012), the age at which parents begin reading with their young child/ren, and the frequency that they read with them, is affected by many factors. This paper considers some of those factors and the role baby book gifting schemes may play in supporting early shared reading practices in families.

## **Factors Influencing Reading with Infants**

Previous research suggests that many factors influence reading practices with infants and young children. For example, Yarosz and Barnett (2001) found that frequency of reading to young children varied by ethnicity, the language spoken at home, the child's age, the number of siblings, and the mother's educational attainment. They also found that as a family increased in size there were comparatively large decreases in reading time, and that establishing the habit of reading in the early years is critical. Debaryshe (1993) indicates that the age at which reading began at home was the strongest predictor of oral language skills, whereas Dickinson, et al. (2012), for instance, points to the benefits of reading regularly to infants from as early as 8 months, suggesting that the greatest

benefits are a regular reading routine combined with responsive interactions with caregivers and enriching language.

As well as the age that reading begins being important, frequency and high-quality reading interactions have been shown to increase language development (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). A home environment with lots of parental involvement in reading and literacy activities is recognised for literacy success (Hall, 2001; Wray & Medwell, 2013), and is an important predictor of a child's development, even when parental education and occupation are considered (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). Exposure to books in the home environment can also lead to increased reading achievement, listening, and speaking ability (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004). While most studies that examine reading in early childhood concentrate on mothers, some studies have looked at fathers reading to their infants (Duursma, Pan & Raikes, 2008; Swain, Cara & Mallows, 2017), and research suggests that fathers contribute in a unique way to their child's language development (Malin, Cabrera & Rowe, 2014). For instance, a study by Duursma (2014) that examined paternal and maternal book reading frequency among 430 low-income families, found that paternal book reading at child ages 24 and 36 months was a significant predictor of child language and cognitive skills and book knowledge. Likewise, Baker (2014) suggests that 3 to 5 year olds whose fathers read and talk to them regularly behave and concentrate better at nursery, and do better in mathematics.

Parental literacy levels and the home learning environment also influence reading practices with infants. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011) stresses the need to foster an enjoyment of reading and a love of books among children, while also highlighting the critical role played by parents in fostering children's interest in books, in supporting their oral language, literacy and writing skills within the home environment. Likewise, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012. p. 24) emphasises the home environment as 'one of the most powerful influences on child development', with Han and Neuhaarth-Pritchett, (2014) highlighting its critical impact on children's early literacy skills.

With regard to the home literacy environment, studies have also focussed on socioeconomic context (SES), indicating that social backgrounds matter, particularly in terms of children's early experiences with language and literacy (Hart & Risley, 1995; Melhuish, 2010; Tarelli & Stubbe, 2010; Hartas, 2011; Duursma, 2014). In particular, it has been noted that 'socio economic disadvantage, lack of maternal educational qualifications...remained powerful

in influencing competencies in children aged three and at the start of primary school’ (Hartas, 2011). Furthermore, a study by Hemmerechts, Agirdag and Kavadias (2017) undertaken across ten European regions, noted that parental involvement in literacy activities was influenced by socio-economic status (SES). This study found that children from a family with a low SES experience late involvement in literacy activities more than children from a family with high SES (Hemmerechts et al., 2017).

A broad range of family literacy initiatives, including book gifting schemes, have often been targeted in areas of social disadvantage within many countries. Evaluation of these initiatives suggests that ‘family literacy programmes are effective both in improving child literacy and in improving parental support skills’ (Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster, & Vorhaus, 2011). It is widely recognised that children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage often enter schooling with a distinct language deficit, in comparison to their non-disadvantaged peers (Mac Donald & Figueredo, 2010; Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer, 2012), with the DES (2011. P.62) noting that children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are ‘significantly more likely to experience difficulties in literacy and numeracy achievement than other children’.

While there are benefits for child development when reading commences in the first year of life ( Murray & Egan, 2014; Dickinson et al., 2012), reading practices in the home environment are influenced by many factors, some of which act as barriers to family reading (Yarosz and Barnett, 2001). One intervention that aims to encourage reading with infants in the home environment, and that can help overcome some of these barriers, are infant book gifting schemes.

## **Infant Book Gifting Schemes**

As the name suggests, book gifting programmes involve giving free books to babies or children and their families. Programmes are often run as part of family literacy programmes and have been used intermittently over the years by many organisations and communities around the world. Some well-known international book gifting programmes include Bookstart ([www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)), Reach Out and Read (ROR) ([www.reachoutandread.org](http://www.reachoutandread.org)), and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) ([www.imaginationlibrary.com](http://www.imaginationlibrary.com)).

One of the earliest programmes, in the USA, Beginning with Books, distributed books to children from low income families. This was the inspiration for Wendy Cooling, founder of Bookstart in the UK. Wendy observed children across all

backgrounds who were not being read to by busy working parents (Booktrust, 2017); therefore she wanted to implement a universal gifting approach, rather than just a scheme for low income or low literacy families. Bookstart began in Birmingham in England in 1992 as a pilot project. It was supported by Birmingham University School of Education, local libraries and health services, and the independent charity Booktrust. Hardman & Jones (1999) report that by the late 1990s, over 30 such initiatives were in place across the UK.

Bookstart has inspired similar schemes internationally including Bookstart in Japan (2000), Korea (2003) and Thailand (2005), Buchstart in Germany (2007), and Lesestart (2011). There are also many national and regional book gifting schemes in operation such as Nati per Leggere, Italy (1999), Read to Me! Nova Scotia, Canada (2002), Boekbabys in Flanders, Belgium (2005), Bogstart in Denmark (2009), Boekenpret and BoekStart in the Netherlands (2009), with Buchstart established in Austria in January 2015. Bookstart is generally delivered by a health visitor (sometimes, a community nurse or registrar) at age birth -12 months. At the first stage parents may receive 2 board books, a rhyme sheet and a booklet with tips and guidance for sharing books with their infants. There are also other associated book gifting programmes for older children.

Reach Out and Read (ROR) in the USA is a health-care and evidence-based book gifting programme that aims to prevent developmental and learning problems in early childhood. It began in a clinic in Boston in 1989, and soon doctors in over 4000 clinics were involved. Wray & Medwell (2013) report that by 2008, all 50 US states were participating, with 3.5 million children benefitting from the distribution of 5.7 million books. ROR, which aims to include children from low income communities, is delivered by the paediatrician in one of ten planned well child visits between the ages of birth to 5 years. By the age of five, the child should have their own library of 10 books. As well as delivering the book to the child at each visit, the doctor talks to the parent about reading aloud, and engaging with the child as they read. The scheme also includes volunteers in the waiting room, who model reading aloud and book-sharing behaviour (Canfield et al., 2018). The ROR programme encourages families to read aloud together through early literacy guidance as doctors "prescribe" reading to young children and families during visits (Wray & Medwell, 2013).

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) is an international scheme which originated in the US, when, in 1996, Dolly Parton initiated the scheme in Sevier County, Tennessee, her home place. It expanded nationally before becoming global. Parton's vision was to foster a love of reading among Tennessee's

pre-school children. Each month, from birth to five years old, participating children receive a high quality and age appropriate book in the post, along with a book sharing guide for parents. By the time the child enters school, they have a 60-volume library of their own. A community needs to get behind the programme as they register the children, promote the programme, and also seek sponsorship and fundraise to support the programme. The success of the programme is reflected in its rapid expansion to Canada in 2006, to Rotherham City Council, and to children in care in Scotland in 2007, and to Australia in 2017. Ireland became the fifth international operator of the Imagination Library in 2019. To date, there are 1,422,180 children registered, with over 125,030,397 books posted to children around the world (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2019).

### **Infant Book Gifting Schemes in Ireland**

Currently in Ireland, there is no national baby book gifting scheme. However, there have been a number of schemes at local or regional levels. For example, Book4babies has been in operation in Wexford since 2012/3, and is currently the only book gifting programme available to all new infants in any county in Ireland. It was set up by teachers, healthcare professionals, and experts in literacy with support from Bookstart Northern Ireland and the Institute for Community Health Nursing. Since its inception, more than 10,000 babies, aged 7-9 months, have benefited from the scheme. Moreover, 2,000 infants approximately receive a book gift pack annually containing two books, guidance to parents on the importance of reading and an invitation to join the local library and, information about local services. Packs are distributed by Public Health Nurses at a baby's 7–9 month developmental check.

The Preparing For Life (PFL) programme in North Dublin is a community based home visiting project, offering a wide range of supports to participants from pregnancy through to the age of 4 or 5 years, when the child begins school. One aspect of the programme is that each participating family receive a book pack (seven books and a tip sheet encouraging early reading with advice on reading strategies and expectations) when their infant is approximately 3 months old. PFL has a total of 210 tip sheets on a range of parenting topics, and in the first year, families receive 13 tip sheets focused specifically on reading. A major component of this intervention involves home visits, where each family is assigned a mentor who visits the family for the duration of the project. The mentors hold college degrees in education, social care, and youth studies, and they receive extensive training prior to programme implementation (Preparing

for Life, 2008: O'Farrelly, Doyle, Victory, & Palamaro-Munsell, 2018).

Other local book gifting schemes commenced in Ireland in early 2019, including the Dolly Parton Imagination Library for instance, which is currently being piloted in Dublin 24. In April 2019, Children's Books Ireland (CBI) established a pilot book gifting scheme for babies in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Limerick City and County. Funded through the JP McManus Benevolent Fund and the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), the Bookseed scheme will operate for two years, and involves the distribution of 'bookseed packs' to parents free of charge at their baby's 3 month check. The packs contain a board book by an Irish author, parental guidance materials, and information about library services. A second board book is given at the 7 to 9 month health check, with a third book available for collection by parents at the local library when their baby is 1 year old. When selecting the three books, CBI consulted with multiple community stakeholders including the evaluation team from Mary Immaculate College Limerick, Public Health Nurses, librarians, and Speech and Language Therapists. Consideration was given to infant development over the first year of life, as well as the diversity of language and literacy abilities in the families receiving the packs. The scheme is supported by the Health Services Executive Public Health Nurses and by local librarians to encourage parents to read with their babies, and to foster a positive disposition towards reading in young children.

## **Evidence Regarding the Impact of Book Gifting Schemes**

Many book gifting schemes have undergone evaluations to determine whether they have an impact on family reading practices and child developmental outcomes. For example, previous research on ROR, described by the researchers as a modest literacy intervention, had a significant impact on a child's home literacy environment (Weitzman, Roy, Walls & Tomlin, 2004). Some studies have shown that children who participated in ROR, are more likely to enjoy reading, own more books and describe reading as a favourite activity. Children receiving care at ROR clinics have also demonstrated greater language abilities than their peers who did not participate in the programme (Wray & Medwell, 2013). Other studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in improving children's receptive and expressive language development (Willis, Kabler-Babbitt, & Zuckerman, 2007). Canfield et al., (2018) evaluated an initiative that looked at literacy recourse in low income families and found significant associations between families that participated in ROR, using the library and book sharing.

In the UK, longitudinal research tracked the progress of infants in the Bookstart programme in Birmingham, from when they were 7 months old through to 7

years old (Moore & Wade, 2003). They found that participants looked at books, bought books, shared books, and visited the library more often than the control group. The findings also suggest that children who participated in Bookstart had improved language and literacy performance by the age of four when they began school, and that they maintained the benefits in the first three years of primary school. Other reported findings from research on Bookstart found children had higher scores in Listening and Speaking (20%) and Reading and Writing (19%) than non-participants (Moore & Wade, 2003; Wray & Medwell, 2013).

Research on Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has reported short, medium, and long term benefits. In the short term, they identify an enhanced home literacy environment with caregiver reading earlier to infants, increased frequency and duration of caregiver infant reading sessions, and an increased library of books in participant's homes. Due to the increased frequency of reading, DPIL (2018) report positive attitudes about reading and increased interactions between parent and child during reading. A recent study on the DPIL scheme found short term benefits just a year on. In comparison to their baseline reports, parents reported greater frequencies of shared reading, more involvement with their children during shared reading, and a greater interest in reading among the children themselves (Anderson, Atkinson, Swaggerty & O'Brien, 2019).

In the UK, a qualitative study of DPIL, observed that parents and children were very enthusiastic about receiving the monthly book in the post. Having the books meant that bedtime was special and story time became part of the daily routine, and according to some parental reports, encouraged children to draw more. It was not only the recipient that benefitted, but siblings did too. Hall & Jones (2016) report that older siblings could encourage the child to read, and the books were considered of a high quality and often better than the books from school. They further report that grandparents too, or extended family members, were likely to get involved in reading and book sharing with the children. Research in the US found long term benefits of participating in the Imagination Library, with Samiei, Bush, Sell, and Imig (2016) reporting that a significantly higher percentage of those consistently participating in the Imagination Library were considered better ready for kindergarten.

Evidence from the book gifting schemes in Ireland also indicate positive effects on family reading practices. An evaluation of Books4babies (2017) found that there were a number of short to medium term outcomes observed. The evaluation consisted of a survey of parents (n=61), Public Health Nurses (n=13),



and early years practitioners (n=10) as well as focus groups with parents, PHNs, and health workers in the Travelling community. Semi-structured interviews with the steering committee were also undertaken. The evaluation found increased awareness of beginning shared book reading with infants and involving the wider family in book sharing. It also found that the programme was a means to address adult literacy issues in a cost effective manner, and that it had effected positive change in literacy levels in the county through interagency collaboration. Parents believed that their infant was more interested in books, and that the programme increased confidence in book sharing as well as reading a wider range of books to the infant. For families that had not considered reading with their child, Books4babies encouraged book sharing and encouraged use of the library. A wider family impact was noted, with adults and siblings also reading to the child (MacDonald & Kinlen, 2017). Preliminary findings from the BookSeed evaluation in Limerick also indicated an initial positive response from parents to the scheme (Moloney, Egan, Hoyne, Pope & Breatnach, 2020).

A recent evaluation of a book gifting programme used a randomised controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of a Bookstart+ which gives families in Northern Ireland a pack of books and reading materials at their two-year-old child's statutory health visit. It found evidence of a positive and significant effect on parents' attitudes to reading and books. However, although there was an improvement in means scores of parents in the intervention group in their attitudes to their child reading, it was not statistically significant. The effects of the programme suggest that regardless of SES or educational background, family size or previously receiving a Bookstart pack, parents with lower levels of education enjoyed and used the packs more than their counterparts with higher levels of education (O'Hare & Connolly, 2014).

The research evidence regarding book gifting schemes seems largely positive, with findings across the various schemes suggesting they enhance the home literacy environment, and support parent-child shared reading practices (e.g., Moore & Wade, 2003; Wray & Medwell, 2013; Zuckerman, 2009; Anderson, Atkinson, Swaggerty & O'Brien, 2019) However, not all schemes have demonstrated a positive impact. For example, an Australian low intensity literacy promotion programme, aimed at children aged birth - 4 years, found no benefits to literacy and language in their literacy promotion and Let's Read book programme (Goldfeld, Quach, Nicholls, Reilly, Ukoumunne & Wake, 2012).

In the Let's Read programme, families received four age appropriate books, in addition to a book list and guidance messages, at 4, 12, and 18 months and at 3.5

years. However, the programme appeared to have no quantifiable result on the literacy or language outcomes measured. One potential reason explored for the lack of impact was that while the participating families were from disadvantaged geographic areas, none of them were especially disadvantaged. It may be the case that higher intensity programmes that target more disadvantaged families specifically have greater success (Goldfeld, et al., 2012). Furthermore, although no benefits for children and their families were observed, there appeared to be no harm for the families participating in this book gifting programme either. It may also be the case that there were benefits to the families, other than language and literacy that were not measured, and therefore not apparent.

Findings from these various evaluations highlight the importance of a good research evidence base in understanding what factors are important for book gifting programmes to have a positive effect on family reading practices.

## **Developing and Maintaining Infant Book Gifting Schemes**

Many different book gifting schemes operate around the world, besides those briefly described above (i.e., Bookstart, Reach Out and Read, and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library). While the various schemes share many similarities such as gifting books, literacy information, and the ages when books are given out, they vary hugely in a number of factors such as whom they target, who funds them, who delivers the books, and the overall aim of the programme. For example, some are stand-alone programmes, sponsored by local authorities or communities, and aim to foster a love of reading, increase literacy for young children or provide books to children who may not have access to books in their home (e.g. Bookstart in the UK). Others are part of health check-ups for children such as Reach out and Read in the US. Variation also exists across book gifting programmes in terms of who delivers or distributes the books to the family or child (e.g. the library, health or medical clinics), how schemes are organised (e.g. whether it consists of a book pack or voucher system or is hand delivered versus mail), whether training is ongoing (e.g. ROR) or not (e.g. Let's Read in Australia), and the duration of the book gifting programme.

While book gifting schemes have many positive benefits, implementing them can be challenging (e.g., keeping people involved and interested), and they can be difficult to maintain. Many local projects have operated sporadically or ceased operating as critical funding has run out. For example, after 26 years of operating in Pittsburgh, the pioneering programme *Beginning with Books* was forced to cease operations in 2010 due to lack of funding. Similarly, in 2010, the UK Government announced it was no longer providing a grant to the charity

Booktrust which operates the Bookstart programme (it has since adapted by collaborating with multiple agencies to support initiatives). Even if funding is available for the books themselves, it may be too costly to employ a project worker to run the project. Balancing giving book gifts to the universal population versus targeting children in disadvantaged areas is an important consideration, particularly where funding is an issue.

At a practical and logistic level of operating book gifting schemes, professionals involved in delivering books can experience certain difficulties. For many reasons, professionals may not share details of a scheme operating in their area and so children may miss out. Hall and Jones (2016) found this to be the case in relation to the DPIL, where some professionals did not share details of the scheme amongst professionals working with families who could benefit. An air of pessimism was noted amongst some community workers, who did not believe that one initiative, such as DPIL, could fix all the literacy problems that families experienced. Added to this, was the stark difference between the professionals' and parents' views on the book gifting programme. Parents and families were very eager to receive the books, whereas community workers had negative feelings towards the programme (Hall & Jones, 2016). Similarly, other research observed that the focus of many book gifting programmes did not extend to possible literacy needs and parents' struggles (Fralick, 2006).

Professionals involved in Bookstart in the UK, which included health visitors and library staff, were overwhelmingly positive toward the scheme and recognised the value of giving books to babies and young children. Nursery nurses observed how the benefits were not just for the children, but extended across the family. Most families benefitted, and it created a positive attitude to books and sharing books. However, health visitors reported there were some harder to reach families, and an awareness that parents whose first language was not English, may have different needs (Moore & Wade, 2003).

An evaluation of Books4babies in Wexford, Ireland, found that involving Public Health Nurses was essential to its success (MacDonald & Kinlen, 2017). They believed that having a number of different funding sources helped strengthen the programme and its reliance on any one funding body. Critically, because it is a universal book gifting model, it does not stigmatise families that have greater literacy needs. The choice of books is also important, especially for anyone with a literacy issue. Therefore, books must not be too wordy (MacDonald & Kinlen, 2017). Tips and advice on reading also need to be very clear and easy to review, and information that the library is free and open to all. Again, the Books4babies

evaluation found many families were not aware of this. In conjunction with local libraries, MacDonald & Kinlen (2017) suggest that a list of available and recommended books could be included in the book gift pack. However, the findings indicated that some parents choose to attend the GP for vaccinations rather than the developmental check up with the Public Health Nurse, meaning that many children potentially could miss out on books or guidance at critical stages (MacDonald & Kinlen, 2017).

## **A National Book Gifting Scheme for Ireland?**

International evidence demonstrates that reading to infants is associated with many developmental benefits, and that baby book gifting schemes are a good way to encourage and support parents to read with their infants. However, as mentioned, there is no national book gifting scheme in Ireland at present. In 2018, the Irish Government launched 'First 5', a whole government strategy for babies, young children, and their families. First 5 sets out proposals to establish a system of integrated, cross- sectoral, and high-quality supports and services to help all babies and young children in Ireland to have positive early experiences. A book gifting programme incorporates many of these key points, by involving the whole family and supporting development through book sharing. As with Bookseed Limerick, book gifting can also integrate community supports such as Public Health Nurses, who gift books and provide useful tips and information on shared reading, while also introducing families to local services such as libraries that are free and open to all.

Amongst a range of other proposals to support babies, young children, and their families, First 5 proposes the piloting and testing of a 'Book Bag' initiative over the lifetime of the strategy, which runs from 2019 to 2028. With a view to a potential national programme, First 5 states that 'Evaluation of impact and cost-benefit analysis will determine if the initiatives are suitable for wider roll-out' (Govt. Ireland, 2018, p. 172). Drawing on findings from the existing research evidence base in Ireland, and internationally, it is proposed that the below questions should be carefully considered in the development of a national book gifting scheme for Ireland. These questions focus on programme funding, design, delivery, and evaluation:

- How will the scheme be funded to ensure sustainability in the longer term?
- Who will be responsible for delivering the programme?
- Will those involved in delivering the scheme receive additional training

and support?

- How will this work be integrated into existing workloads?
- Will the scheme involve maternity hospitals, health centres, libraries, ECEC settings, general practitioners, An Post or a combination of services?
- How will stakeholders be consulted?
- Who will be responsible for designing the programme?
- What process will be used to select books?
- At what ages will babies and parents receive the books?
- How many books will families receive?
- Will all families with infants participate in the scheme or just those in areas of low income or low literacy? (i.e., Will the scheme be universal or targeted?)
- How will the needs of those requiring extra supports with literacy or the English language be addressed?
- Will books be available for those with English as a second language (e.g. 'as Gaeilge' or in other languages)?
- What information will accompany the books?
- How will the scheme be evaluated?

In addition to giving consideration to the above questions, it may also be useful for those running a national book gifting scheme to integrate the scheme with existing supports, practices, and policies available in Ireland. For example, the Nurture Programme, delivered by the HSE, aims to support infant health and well-being. Within Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the Aistear-Síolta practice guide is an invaluable source of support, providing three tip sheets on Enjoying Books with your Baby; Toddler; and Young Children. The National Adult Literacy Association ([www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)) also provides advice and support to parents on reading with young children. Critically, their website differentiates advice and support by age range, beginning with children aged birth to 2 years, and progressing to ages 3 to 4, 5 – 7, culminating in advice for reading with older children aged 10 – 12 years. The Equality and Diversity Charter may also be useful when selecting books for inclusion in any new scheme (e.g., dual-language books (including Braille/non-Braille) and books in the children's home language (Department of Children and

Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016).

## Conclusion

A wealth of evidence supports the developmental benefits of reading with infants and young children, and of the positive impact of baby book gifting schemes on family reading practices. Through First 5, the Irish government plans to introduce an initiative that has the potential to be of great benefit to Irish families. Existing evidence from international schemes, and local schemes in Ireland, provide an insight into both the benefits and challenges of running a book gifting programme. It is evident that the organisation, running, and maintenance of such a large national scheme requires considerable resources and planning. Drawing upon the research evidence, the factors that support or hinder the success of any such initiative as outlined in this paper may therefore be useful to policy makers, local organisations, and communities in establishing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating such a scheme.

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# Exploring a Progression Continua Approach to Developing Spatial Awareness in Preschool Aged Children

Córa Gillic

## Abstract

This paper is based on practice based research carried out in partial fulfilment of a Master of Education degree at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. It explores the use of a progression continua approach in developing practitioner pedagogical and subject content knowledge in relation to the development of spatial awareness in preschool aged children. The policy and research literature shows a focus on preschool mathematics and that spatial awareness is often overlooked in preschool mathematical provision. Findings demonstrate the potential of a learning trajectory approach as a continuing professional development tool in relation to a preschool mathematics provision.

## Introduction

Interest in the educational provision of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects has gained momentum both nationally and internationally over the last decade (Benz, 2012; Thiel, 2010). In Ireland, there has been a focus on literacy and mathematics provision from early childhood to adulthood (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). More recently, educational policy has targeted mathematics provision, with mathematics provision in preschool a priority (DES, 2017).

Spatial awareness has been identified as a key mathematical concept for young children to explore and master as it underpins learning in other STEM concepts (Newcombe, 2017), areas of computer graphics, visual arts (Clements and Sarama, 2011) as well as being a crucial skill humans need to navigate their

surroundings (Newcombe and Frick, 2010). This paper reports on practitioner exploration of the pedagogical practices involved - noticing, interpreting, planning, and documenting in developing spatial awareness in young children, using a progression continua approach.

## **Policy Context**

Ireland's focus on mathematics education is detailed in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life, The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011 – 2020. This document laid out targets and actions to address falling standards in literacy and numeracy over a 10- year period. This strategy noted the importance of a well-trained Early Learning and Care (ELC) workforce in delivering the aims of the strategy, acknowledging that mathematics learning occurs in ELC settings (DES, 2011). The interim report on the strategy's performance, National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 Interim Review: 2011-2016 New Targets: 2017-2020 (DES, 2017), laid out actions specific to the ELC sector. These included the inclusion of early mathematics in early childhood settings. The review also recommended that the Early Childhood Inspectorate support early childhood practitioners in their delivery of early numeracy ideas in their curricula.

From a policy stance, it is clear that government documents call for the inclusion of mathematics in preschool rooms (DES, 2017; DES, 2011). Research literature supports the idea that mathematical concepts feature in young children's everyday lives, extending into their preschool play experiences (Worthington and Van Oers, 2016). As a result, mathematical concepts are now being included in both national and international early childhood curricula (Fosse et al., 2018; Wager et al, 2015; Perry and Dockett, 2013; NCCA, 2009).

## **Curricular Context**

In an Irish context there are three curricular documents relevant to the teaching of early childhood mathematics – Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the current primary mathematics curriculum (NCCA, 1999), and a draft primary mathematics curriculum (NCCA, 2018). For the purpose of this paper, only Aistear and the new draft primary mathematics curriculum will be discussed, due to Aistear being the curriculum framework for ELC settings and the draft primary curriculum being in a progression continua format.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) presents a thematic approach to early childhood pedagogy, with no reference to specific subject areas (Hayes, 2013). The inter-connected themes are: Well-Being, Identity & Belonging, Communicating and Exploring,

and Thinking. Each theme has four aims, and each aim has six learning goals. The latter two themes, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking detail explicit, yet broad, mathematical learning goals, while Identity and Belonging promotes learning dispositions, necessary for mathematics, such as persistence and curiosity (NCCA, 2009). Aistear promotes a child-centred approach to early childhood pedagogy, where children are viewed as being active, competent learners, who learn best through an interactive playful pedagogy (NCCA, 2009).

## **Progression Continua**

In 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published a draft mathematics curriculum for junior infants to second class (4 to 8 year olds). This new curriculum has been designed to align with the playful approach to pedagogy, as advocated in Aistear (NCCA, 2009). It is proposed that the new curriculum follow a progression continua approach, enabling children to understand the 'big ideas' of mathematics. Progression continua broadly describe the sequence of a child's mathematical development (NCCA, 2018). They represent the milestones to mathematical understanding. These continua enable educators to formatively assess a child's understanding of a mathematical concept (NCCA, 2018; Sarama and Clements, 2009), and to reflect on mathematics in children's play (Perry and Dockett, 2013). Progression continua also facilitate the planning of further mathematical experiences to develop a child's understanding (NCCA, 2018). Progression continua (also referred to in the literature as learning trajectories (Clements and Sarama, 2014), learning progressions, growth points, cognitively guided instruction (Sarama, Clements, Wolfe and Spitler, 2016) and reflection continua (Perry and Dockett, 2013), have been gaining prominence in mathematics education (Weber, Walkington and MacGalliard, 2015; Dunphy et al. 2014) in recent years.

Learning Outcome: Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to develop a sense of spatial awareness and reasoning.

| Elements                   | a   | B  | c   | d   |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Understanding & Connecting | <p>Is at present, exposed to and experiences a range of appropriate learning activities involving location/position in familiar environments.</p> <p>Begins to develop an awareness of the position of their body in space, through multi-sensory approaches.</p> <p>Begins to explore the movements of different parts of the body and/ or the ways in which the body can move, or be moved in space, relative to their level of mobility.</p> | <p>Describes the position or location of objects.</p> <p>Explores and discusses the environment of the classroom, school, and other familiar settings.</p> | <p>Describes the location and relative proximity of objects using appropriate language e.g. far away, further away, closest to.</p> | <p>Recognises and describes the position of objects on simple maps and plans.</p> <p>Explores different modes of representing spatial concepts and relationships.</p> |

|             |  |   |   |  |
|-------------|--|---|---|--|
| Communicate | Is at present, exposed to and experiences situations where movement and positionality are used and highlighted through varied multi-modal approaches.                      | <p>Gives and follows simple instructions related to movement and positioning.</p> <p>Uses and responds to language that describes simple movements.</p> <p>Moves objects around and describes in terms of spatial relationships.</p>                | <p>Communicates position or location through a range of modes such as physical, written, verbal, visual, augmentative e.g. makes simple models or drawings to show position of objects – teddy between the car and the book</p> | <p>Creates and discusses representations of familiar or imagined spaces e.g. bedroom, schoolyard or story setting in a variety of modes.</p> <p>Recognises and uses 'left' and 'right' in real situations and communicates positions and directions with increasing precision.</p> |
| Reasoning   | Is at present, exposed to and experiences activities where objects and/ or people are placed in familiar positions or moved to random positions e.g. Where has teddy gone? | <p>Determines the location of an object by listening to descriptions of position or location.</p> <p>Evaluates statements about position or location in the environment e.g. determine if it is correct to say, 'the teddy is under the chair'.</p> | <p>Justifies statements about position and location of objects with reference to simple representations where appropriate</p>   | <p>Evaluates and refines self-created maps or plans.</p> <p>Explores spatial relationships in number lines to conjecture and predict approximate location of numbers.</p>  |

|                              |   |   |  |   |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Applying and Problem-solving | Is at present, exposed to and experiences a range of contexts where movement and positionality are explored e.g. a range of physical activities, transitions and spatial games such as blocks and jigsaws | Solves problems involving location/ position in familiar and new environments e.g. where is the best place to plant a tree/ store new toys etc. | Describes simple paths through familiar environments and traces paths on simple maps, plans or grids.<br><br>Builds and creates structures using a range of strategies and materials e.g. blocks | Solves problems involving simple maps, plans or grids e.g. barrier games, including maps and images from various angles and/or perspectives / vantage points. |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|---|

**Table 1 Early Progression Milestones from the Progression Continua for Spatial Awareness and Location (NCCA, 2018, pp.62-63 – Draft specification ©).**

In 2009, Sarama and Clements published a research-based learning trajectory approach for the teaching of early childhood mathematics. This approach detailed a learning trajectory for each of the ‘big ideas’ of mathematics [the ‘big ideas’ will be discussed in a later section of this paper]. One of the key aims of Sarama and Clements’ work was to promote high-quality mathematics activity in early childhood settings in the United States (Sarama and Clements, 2009). This approach comprises of three parts: a mathematical goal, a developmental progression, and a set of suggested instructional tasks (Clements and Sarama, 2014). These steps were developed with the aim of helping early childhood teachers identify the level of mathematical thinking observed in children’s activity and planning developmentally - appropriate tasks to develop that thinking at a higher level.

This study used the draft progression continua developed by the NCCA (2018). This format was chosen for several reasons: it has been developed for the Irish educational system and aligns with Aistear (NCCA, 2018); the learning outcomes are clear and easy to follow; and the curriculum age-range (4-12) covers the age range of the majority of participants attending the setting (3-5), where ten of the participants were four years of age (NCCA, 2018).

## The 'Big Ideas' of Mathematics

The research literature in mathematics education often refers to the necessity of early childhood educators understanding the 'big ideas' of early childhood mathematics (Dooley et al., 2014). However, what constitutes these 'big ideas' varies among researchers. An overview of the 'big ideas', as suggested by key researchers in the field of early childhood mathematics and those found in Irish curricular documents: Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Primary Mathematics Curriculum Draft Specification Junior Infants to Second Class (NCCA, 2018), is provided in this literature review (Table 2). In summary, the literature suggests that the following mathematical concepts be included in early childhood mathematics curricula: number, data handling, shape, space, and measure.

As stated earlier, this research focused on using a progression continua approach to developing spatial awareness in preschool children. Spatial awareness is considered to be a key mathematical concept for young children to master (Dunphy, 2017; Hawes, Tepylo and Moss, 2015; Clements and Sarama, 2014). The literature suggests that spatial reasoning underpins other mathematical concepts such as geometry (National Research Council, 2009), measurement and mapping (Kersh, Casey and Mercer Young, 2008), computer graphics, engineering (Clements and Sarama, 2011) as well as being a crucial navigational skill (Newcombe and Frick, 2010). However, spatial awareness is often overlooked in early childhood curricula (Clements and Sarama, 2011) in favour of number, counting, and shape Lee, 2017; Lee and Ginsburg, 2009).

|  |   |  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| Clements & Sarama<br>(2009)<br>Powerful<br>Mathematical Ideas<br>(USA) | Perry & Dockett<br>(2008)<br>Big Ideas of<br>Mathematics<br>(Australia) | Early Math<br>Collaborative<br>(2014)<br>Big Ideas<br>of Early<br>Mathematics<br>(USA) | NCCA (2018)<br>Draft Primary<br>Mathematics<br>Curriculum<br>(Ireland) | Aistear (NCCA<br>2009)<br>The early<br>childhood<br>curriculum<br>framework<br>(Ireland) |
| Counting   |   | Counting   | Numeration &<br>counting   | Counting skills  |
| Quantity, number,<br>subitizing  | Number sense  | Number<br>Sense  | Number<br>patterns,<br>sequences &<br>relationships                    | Numerals<br>(symbols)  |

|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Comparing,<br>ordering, estimating           | Data                               | Sets (sorting)<br>Data Analysis     | Data                              | Comparing,<br>ordering, sorting,<br>matching                                |
| Early addition/<br>subtraction<br>strategies | Mental<br>computations             | Number<br>operations                | operations                        |   |
| Composition of<br>number, place value        |                                    |                                     | Place value,<br>fractions         |   |
| Spatial thinking                             | Spatial &<br>geometric<br>thinking | Spatial<br>relationships            | Spatial<br>Awareness              | Space, place  |
| Composition &<br>decomposition of<br>shapes  |                                    | Shape:<br>Developing<br>definitions | Shape,<br>transformation          | shape   |
| length                                       |                                    | Measurement                         | Measuring                         | Length<br>size<br>weight<br>height<br>Measures<br>capacity<br>money<br>Time |
| Area, volume, angle                          |                                    |                                     | Time                              |   |
|  | probability                        |                                     | Money                             |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
| Pattern & structure                          |                                    | Pattern                             | Patterns,<br>Structures,<br>Rules |   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   | Mathematical<br>language  |
| Mathematical Processes                       |                                    |                                     |                                   |   |
| Reasoning                                    | mathematization                    |                                     | Understanding<br>& connecting     | Problem-solving   |
| Problem Solving                              | connections                        |                                     | Communicating                     | Predicting  |
| Classification                               | argumentation                      |                                     | Reasoning                         | analysing   |
| Seriation                                    |                                    |                                     | Applying &<br>Problem-<br>Solving | questioning   |
|  |                                    |                                     |                                   | justifying  |

**Table 2: Big ideas of early childhood mathematics – mathematical goals for early childhood mathematics provision**



## Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) has been defined as “the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to students” (Shulman, 1986). PCK is how teachers ‘teach’ a subject; it entails the various teaching strategies that teachers use to communicate subject matter in an understandable and meaningful way (Lee, 2010). In terms of PCK in relation to early childhood mathematics, Lee (2017) contends that traditional definitions of pedagogical content knowledge, based on primary education, are not applicable to a play-based preschool context and suggests that preschool PCK, in relation to mathematics education, should contain these three interrelated activities or skills:

- Noticing mathematical situations in play
- Interpreting these mathematical episodes
- Developing the mathematical thinking therein (p.253)

Lee’s (2017) study of 30 Korean preschool teachers indicated that the teacher’s ability to identify mathematics in play did not mean that they were able to interpret the mathematics they had observed. However, the ability of participants who could interpret the mathematics was positively connected to their ability to develop mathematical concepts and thinking observed in play. Lee (2017) concluded that a stronger subject content knowledge was required to interpret and develop mathematical concepts observed.

In a study of 22 Head Start teachers in the United States, McCray and Chen (2012) concluded that in order to be effective mathematics teachers, preschool educators must not only be able to recognise the mathematics in children’s play, but must also be willing to enable children to make connections between mathematical experiences. This ‘willingness’ to engage young children in mathematics is fuelled by mathematical subject knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and by a belief in the importance of mathematics in early childhood education (Lee, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of a progression continua approach in developing practitioner subject knowledge in relation to spatial awareness, and their pedagogical content knowledge in order to provide key spatial experiences for preschool children in a playful and developmentally appropriate way.

## Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative, case study methodological approach, as it sought to understand the spatial awareness of participants during periods of free play. In this study, the case investigated was the exploration of a progression continua approach to document and plan for young children's spatial awareness in the researcher's preschool setting. This study was conducted in a natural setting – the participants' preschool room.

## Research Question

After a review of the literature, the following research question emerged:

What are an early childhood teacher's experiences of using a progression continua approach for developing spatial awareness in a preschool classroom?

To answer this question, two research sub-questions were formulated:

1. Can a progression continua approach capture aspects of participant spatial awareness in their play, as observed by the researcher?
2. What are the researcher's perceptions of the use of a progression continua approach in an Irish preschool mathematics context?

## Research Tools

This study used observation as the data collection method. Observation is a systematic way to "record people, events, behaviours, settings, artefacts (and) routines" (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2011). Observation provides a way of recording events as they occur, thereby collecting 'live' data. This real-life data is authentic; it documents real life as it happens, and consequently, it is "direct evidence" of what is actually happening in a setting (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, observation, provided a real record of participants' spatial activity in their play. Two types of observation, structured and participant, were used to capture the spatial activity in participant free play.

During the structured observations, a pre-prepared observation schedule was used to observe and document participant spatial language use. This tool facilitated the recording of the type of spatial language used (positional, directional, movement, distance), and the frequency at which each type occurred. Participant observations, where the researcher actively participated in participant play, enabled the recording of spatial actions as well as spatial language.

Observations of participants are an integral part of the daily preschool routine.

Therefore, participants were familiar with the data collection methods before the researcher began conducting formal observations.

Sampling procedure: Convenience and purposive sampling was chosen, as the researcher's aim was to examine the spatial reasoning of children in their own classroom, and to explore the use of a learning trajectory approach to improving their own pedagogical and assessment practice in relation to the development of spatial awareness. Purposive sampling is not generalizable, however, as Schutt (2006) notes, this is irrelevant in this case as the researcher was documenting spatial knowledge and evaluating pedagogical practices/tools for their own professional development and understanding.

Participants: The research sample consisted of eleven preschool participants (five girls and six boys), aged three and four years, in a Montessori - based preschool room. The class was funded by the Early Childhood Care and Education payment, facilitated by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The children were Irish born, with two being dual language learners. Ten of the participants in the sample were to attend a Junior Infant class in local primary schools in September 2019.

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this case study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin City University. Informed consent was sought from the gatekeepers (parents and setting manager) was sought. Informed assent was sought from the participants through the use of verbal explanation and a visual chart. The visual chart comprised of three pieces of card, each with a corresponding emoji, in the following colours:

- Green (smiley face) – indicating a wish to participate
- orange – (unsure face) not sure
- red – (unhappy face) indicating not wishing to participate
- Participants indicated if they wished to participate in any given observation session by locating their name on one of the emojis. All participants had the option to join the observation group as they pleased and could withdraw at any time.
- Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to maintain confidentiality.

## **Findings and Discussion**

As the main focus of this study is the observation and assessment of spatial

awareness in young children's play, the discussion will consider the findings against the definition of assessment as given in Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice (NCCA, 2009b), which states that: "assessment is the ongoing process for collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning" (p.72). The links between the components of assessment, as stated in Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and those found in Lee's (2017) aspects of preschool mathematics pedagogy (noticing, interpreting, enhancing), and to the components of the learning trajectory proposed by Clements and Sarama (2014), are clear. Each refers to collecting data (observation, in this case), interpreting the data and using the information gathered to enhance learning. From this stance, progression continua (learning trajectories) fit with current Irish early childhood assessment practice.

### **Noticing Spatial Awareness in Children's Free Play**

This study found that by engaging with the progression continua (NCCA, 2018), the researcher, in time, became familiar with the components of spatial awareness, and could identify spatial activity and spatial language use during play. This suggests that, over time, familiarity with the progression continua for spatial awareness led to the researcher being able to readily identify aspects of spatial mathematics in play. The ability to recognise, document, analyse, and plan for playful mathematics has been frequently noted in the literature (Lee, 2017; Opperman et al., 2016; Anders and Rossbach, 2015). The key capabilities of observing and reflecting on mathematical play (Perry and Dockett, 2013) are crucial to unlocking the mathematics that preschool children know (McCray and Chen, 2012), and for future mathematical learning (Lee, 2017). Observation is an adult-led assessment method, noted in Aistear (NCCA, 2009b). In this study, observations of spatial (mathematical) language use and activity were guided by the progression continua / learning trajectory approach for spatial awareness and location devised by the NCCA (2018).

Observations showed that participants used basic spatial vocabulary in their play: 'in', 'on', and 'under' were the most commonly observed.

**Table 3: Positional language used by participants during week 1**

| Enda                  | Killian                  | Isobel              | Cara   | David | John | Ellie  | Mike   | Aimee        | Rosie | Liam |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|------|--------|--------|--------------|-------|------|
| on,<br>under,<br>over | bottom,<br>top,<br>under | in,<br>under,<br>on | On, in | N/O   | N/O  | in, on | beside | on top<br>of | N/O   | N/O  |

N/O – not observed

Observations also showed that socio-dramatic/imaginative play was an important vehicle for spatial activity and language use, as children moved objects from one place to another as they played. For example, in the sample of the observation of Rosie (see below), the participant moved play equipment and items of furniture to suit her play ideas. Examples of basic spatial/positional language are evident also.

Rosie has set up four chairs; two at the front and two at the back, between two tables

Rosie to Isobel: "I got all the baby stuff in my bag for my baby...you follow me to the car". Rosie sits in the back seat of the car.

Rosie: "I'm in a car that can drive itself". She places a teddy beside her, "you can sit here beside me"...to Isobel: "my baby is asleep already beside me...put a seatbelt on your baby like me...she has to be safe".

Observations also revealed children's interest in and knowledge about their local environment, as the observation below detailing Enda discussing his route home shows. Enda's knowledge and use of directional language is clearly evident. A number of photographs depicting local buildings were on the wall. During this observation, Enda was looking at the pictures and speaking to Aimee.

Enda: "you see this here, pointing to Tesco...you go past that, then turn this way (gestures left), then turn and go straight (hands in front of him – indicating straight)...you need to turn at the roundabout...you can see the vets there, do you know where the vet is?... there's my house".

The focused nature of the observations, tailored to record aspects of spatial language and activity, enabled the researcher to record these aspects of spatial activity that may have ordinarily been missed (Hatch, 2002). The literature suggests that the ability to observe and interpret mathematics in children's everyday lives is underpinned by educator mathematical subject knowledge

(Lee, 2017; Opperman, Anders and Hachfield, 2016; Perry and Dockett, 2016). The use of the progression continua to focus observations enabled the researcher to become more adept at recognising mathematics in a variety of children's play types, and also developed knowledge of what spatial awareness entails and what it looks like in children's play. Therefore, the use of the progression continua contributed to practitioner subject content knowledge for the 'big idea' of spatial awareness and location. This evidence suggests that there is potential for the learning trajectory approach to form part of a professional development tool in relation to mathematics for early childhood educators (Cohrssen and Tayler, 2016; Sarama, Clements, Wolf and Spittler, 2016; Perry and Dockett, 2013; Clements & Sarama, 2009).

### **Interpretation of Mathematics Observed in Play**

Once the observations of spatial activity and language had been made, the next stage was to interpret the data in the observations against the progression milestones for spatial awareness and location, laid out in the draft primary mathematics curriculum (NCCA, 2018). As noted above, the spatial language used by participants was deemed basic in nature. This placed the majority of participants on milestone b of the progression continua for the element, communicating. There were no incidences of more complex spatial vocabulary such as 'far away', 'further away', and 'closest to' as set out in milestone C. Additionally, there were difficulties in placing individual children on the continuum. For example, Enda refers to landmarks and uses directional language and gestures when describing his journey home. However, there was no reference to either the use of landmarks or gesture in the milestone descriptors. After much debate, it was decided to place Enda on milestone C of the continuum under the element, Applying and Problem-solving; 'describes simple paths through familiar environments'. It was felt that this did not reflect the breadth of spatial knowledge and language that Enda used while describing his route, and that perhaps the milestone descriptors should be more detailed to adequately describe a child's level of spatial awareness.

### **Developing the mathematics observed in play**

In order to address the issue of basic spatial vocabulary use across the participants, the researcher modelled precise positional vocabulary, through the game of 'Find my Object' during circle time. Later, two boys, Mike and Enda, played their own version, using the specific vocabulary that had been modelled by the researcher. These findings are consistent with research undertaken by

Klibanoff et al. (2006) on the deep and positive effects of teacher 'math talk' on mathematical knowledge and language used by pre-school aged children. A study by Pruden, Levine and Huttenlocher (2011) also demonstrated a strong link between adult use of spatial language and child use of such vocabulary. The study also showed that after teacher modelling of mathematical language, children used this language in their play. Modelling is identified in Aistear as a pedagogical interaction strategy that can be used by early childhood teachers to teach by example (NCCA, 2009b). Wood (2013) notes that modelling is a pedagogical strategy that encourages imitation through "observational learning" (p.113). In this study, modelling as observational learning was extended to auxiliary staff, as the researcher observed the SNA also using specific positional language during the daily transition, 'Tidy Up' time, after being modelled by the researcher. Modelling specific spatial language during set times of the daily routine, such as 'Tidy Up' time, embeds mathematics as part of everyday, real-life contexts (Linder et al., 2011).

Wood (2013) advocates for direct instructive techniques, once they are used in conjunction with children's emerging interests. In this case, emerging interests were used to develop mathematical concepts, such as movement and direction, as was illustrated in the observations of Enda. A map of the local village, drawn in conjunction with the participants, provided a prompt to use spatial language, not only by Enda, but also by other children. The map provided a familiar and meaningful context (the local village) for spatial exploration and language use. This activity also drew on Enda's 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992), as it developed his personal knowledge gathered from walking from the setting to home with his mother every day. Wager, Graue and Harrigan (2015) state that information educators learn about the daily routines and actions of children's home life can influence the ways in which educators plan mathematical activities, in ways that are meaningful for the children. The building of positive relationships between setting and home is advocated both in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (DES, 2017b), and it is seen as a bridge between what children know and learn between home and preschool. Such information sharing enables both parties to construct a holistic picture of a child's learning (NCCA, 2009b), and in this case, enabled the researcher to devise playful, developmentally appropriate, and meaningful learning opportunities related to spatial awareness, built on this daily routine from home.

## **Documenting the mathematical knowledge and learning**

Aistear (NCCA, 2009b) notes that documenting children's learning is part of the

assessment process. In this research study, children’s learning was recorded in the researcher’s practitioner file. Individual participant record files, and some of the observations were written up in a ‘Learning Story’ (Carr, 2001) format. Aistear identifies all of the above forms of documentation as being suitable for early years practice (NCCA, 2009b). A participant record sheet was devised to document aspects of children’s spatial knowledge and language. This record sheet enabled the researcher to note information gained from observations in relation to individual participant spatial activity. This information was then mapped onto components of the NCCA (2018) progression continua for spatial awareness and location.

**Figure 1: Example of Participant Record Sheet (Enda).**


| Child: Enda                  | Progression Milestone C   | Evidence of Milestone  |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Applying and Problem Solving | Describes simple paths through familiar environments and traces paths on simple maps, plans or grids. | 18.1.19<br>Enda described his journey home from the setting, referring to local landmarks. |

The learning story approach is the usual documentation method in the researcher’s assessment practice. This narrative method of documenting learning presents the learning from a positive, strengths-based approach (Carr and Lee, 2012). The NCCA provide a learning record template for early childhood settings, following this approach. The template has three sections: one for practitioners to write a brief description of the observation, one to interpret the observation (linking to the aims and learning goals of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and one to detail how the learning will be developed. The template clearly links to the three components of the learning trajectory approach (Clements and Sarama, 2014), and to the three aspects of preschool mathematics pedagogy as proposed by Lee (2017). In this study, the observation of Mike and his ferryboat was written as a learning story, using the NCCA template. The format lent itself well to recording Mike’s activity and interpreting the mathematics therein. It was noted that a deeper mathematical interpretation was given as a result of interacting with the draft trajectory for spatial awareness and location (NCCA, 2018). Before engaging with the research project, the researcher would have linked the learning solely to the aims and learning goals of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Now, reference to the progression milestones were also made, thereby





applying a deeper mathematical lens not only to the observation process, but to the observation interpretation process also. This suggests that engagement with the progression continua led to a deeper understanding of mathematical development in the researcher, and that this was demonstrated in the documenting of Mike's learning.

Figure 2: Mike's Learning Story



**Aistear**  
Creating a rich and varied  
early childhood curriculum framework

**Learning Record Template**

|          |   |  |                                     |                                      |  |
|----------|---|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1</b> | <p><b>Look at what I'm doing</b><br/>Include a short description and one or two photos of me as I learn and develop.</p>  | <p><b>Child/children</b><br/>Mike</p>  | <p><b>Practitioner</b><br/>Córa</p> | <p><b>Date</b><br/>February 2019</p> |  |
|          | Photo(s)  | <p><b>Description</b><br/>Mike was playing with the Lego. He was making a 'ferryboat'. He connected three base plates together with larger flat pieces 'to make it bigger'. On one plate he placed many bricks of varying sizes, 'this is where the people go'. On the other two base plates he used bricks to make sections for the cars, because 'you don't stay with your car when you're on the ferry'. There was also a cabin 'for the driver'. Mike placed a large flat piece on the edge of one of the base plates 'for the cars to get on and off'.</p>  |                                     |                                      |  |
| <b>2</b> | <p><b>What does this experience tell you about me?</b><br/>Think about my interests, dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and my understanding. Link to Aistear's themes, aims and learning goals.</p> | <p>As he was creating his 'ferryboat' Mike told me that he had taken the ferry to Wales last year and that his dad had taken him around the ferry. Mike had obviously noted the key features of a ferry and included them in his model (Identity &amp; Belonging, Aim 2 Lg3). Mike has begun to represent space. There was a clear use for each space created – cars on one plate and people on another (Exploring &amp; Thinking, Aim1 Lg5). Mike's discussions of spatial representations of his ferry boat show that he is working at level d of the progression continua for spatial awareness and location (NCCA, 2018). Mike's play connects to his personal experience of going on a ferry. His play has enabled him to refine his fine motor skills (Well-being A2 Lg3), and to express his ideas and knowledge through construction play (Well-being, Aim 3 Lg 2: Communicating, Aim 4, Lg2).</p> |                                     |                                      |  |
| <b>3</b> | <p><b>What will we do next to support my learning?</b><br/>Think about how you can help me to learn more in ways that excite and interest me.</p>   | <p>I will provide Mike with non-fiction books about boats, so he can investigate the different types of boats and their functions. I will encourage Mike to make models of different types of boats using junk materials or construction toys and small-world play items. Mike took a photo of his work on the class tablet, we could ask him to share his work with other children and explain how he made it and why there are different compartments.</p>   |                                     |                                      |  |
| <b>4</b> | <p><b>I want to show my family what I can do.</b><br/>Let me bring my learning record home so I can share it with my family. They love to see and talk to me about what I'm learning.</p>                               | <p>Parent's/Guardian's signature: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Comment:</p>  |                                     |                                      |  |

## Recommendations

At a policy level, a progression continua approach may match with current Irish educational strategies. Literacy and numeracy for Learning and for Life the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People (DES, 2011) identifies the need to “provide detailed guidance and resources to teachers and ECCE practitioners in teaching and assessment of (literacy) and numeracy through handbooks, online courses, digital and other resources” (p.37). Findings from this research suggest that a detailed progression continua approach, with sample activities to promote mathematical concept development, may provide a way to equip ELC educators with the mathematical and pedagogical content knowledge that they need to provide enriching mathematical learning experiences for young children. If one, considers this idea, against the following ‘key action’ identified in Interim Review of the Strategy, “Support practitioners in ECCE settings and teachers in early Start centres to gain a deeper understanding of numeracy concepts, the sequence in which children learn early mathematical ideas and identifying and providing materials and activities which further promote learning in this area” (DES, 2017, p.21). It is clear that the three components of a learning trajectory approach (Clements and Sarama, 2014) - noticing mathematics in play, interpreting the mathematics observed against a progression continuum, and using this information to provide playful, yet instructive activities, could facilitate the enaction of the ‘key action’ stated above.

Findings from this study are suggestive of the potential for progression continua to be used as a form of continuous professional development for preschool educators. That said, it takes time to become familiar with the progression continua. In this study, it took three weeks to become familiar with one ‘big idea’ – spatial awareness and location. In light of this finding, this study also recommends that while a guide would be a practical aid to developing mathematical concepts (or the ‘big ideas’ in ELC rooms), this should be complemented by the facilitation of training for in-service ELC practitioners in relation to early childhood mathematics education. Such provision is currently unavailable, and numeracy pedagogical support is delivered by the DES Early Years Focused Inspectorate (DES, 2017). This is welcome. However, with few early childhood inspectors currently employed by the DES (DES, 2018), it may be some time before settings benefit from this expertise. On-site, on-line or blended training may assist in the process of developing the necessary practitioner mathematical subject content and pedagogical knowledge. The new Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education Degree Programmes

for the Early Learning and Care Sector in Ireland (DES, 2019) may address these concerns at higher education (degree) level.

A third recommendation arising from this study is that further studies be carried out to further evaluate the use of a progression continua approach in an Irish preschool context. This study was conducted in a preschool room with one teacher to eleven children. The researcher also had an interest in early childhood mathematics education and had attended lectures on the subject at Masters level. Another perspective would be beneficial in creating a true evaluation of a progression continua, in the observation and interpretation of, as well as in the planning for enriching mathematical activities at preschool level. It is suggested that research be carried out in a preschool room, where the preschool educator has a level 6 qualification (the mandatory level required to lead teaching in ELC classrooms) and more children attend. This may give a better picture of the effectiveness of the progression continua approach in Irish preschool practice.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The conclusions drawn from this study are limited by its small sample size and tight time frame of three to four weeks. However, Maxwell (2005) notes that qualitative case studies can have an 'internal generalisability', whereby findings can be generalised to the sample population (p.115), provide interesting cases which may be of interest to a wider audience, and which form a basis for other studies on the topic. That is, findings could be transferable to other case studies or cases (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Potential for researcher bias to influence findings was controlled by having data and findings reviewed by a university supervisor, reflective field notes kept, and observations were written up as soon as possible to ensure clarity of events recorded.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the potential of using a progression continua approach to developing spatial awareness in an Irish preschool room with children of three and four years of age. Findings suggest that a progression continua approach complements Irish early years formative assessment practice, as advocated in Aistear (NCCA, 2009), where strategies such as "collecting, documenting, reflecting on and using information" are stated (p. 73). Milestones outlined in the progression continua (NCCA, 2018) provided a guide to both the observation and interpretation of children's spatial activity during play. A progression continua format was found to be a useful tool in developing the researcher's subject knowledge of spatial awareness as they interacted with the milestones

for spatial awareness and location. Accordingly, the study puts forward the potential of the progression continua as a continuing professional development tool in relation to the 'big ideas' of mathematics for preschool educators in conjunction with additional training in early childhood mathematics pedagogy. With increasing Government policy emphasis on the necessity to provide a broad early childhood mathematics foundation, the progression continua developed by the NCCA (2018) could be adapted to address this need.

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# Let's Pretend! Imaginative Play in Irish Early Years Services: Practitioner's Perspectives and Approaches

**Anne Egan, Sarah Hodkinson, & Sheila Garrity**

## **Abstract**

Imaginative play is beneficial to young children's development, their well-being, and allows creativity to flourish. Opportunities to engage in imaginative play at home are being reduced due to the changing nature of childhood, including increasing amounts of time in early years services. This article shares research that examined the perspectives of ten early years practitioners on the benefits of imaginative play, the adult's role in supporting this play, considering both their indoor and outdoor environments. The qualitative research design included interviews with practitioners from services in West Cork, Ireland and the collection of photographic data reflecting their indoor and outdoor environments. Results reveal practitioners appreciate the benefits of imaginative play, that it is well promoted in early years settings, though complex skills and knowledge are required for effective practice. However, outdoor environments were found to be underutilised for this purpose and the participating Montessori environments were less supportive of imaginative play.

## **Introduction**

Imaginative, pretend or fantasy play is something in which young children instinctively engage (Lewis, 2009; Lillard et al., 2011). It allows them to transform reality, to create and become whatever they chose. It has been shown to be extremely valuable to their holistic development and their well-being (Singer & Singer, 1990; Jenkinson, 2001; Kernan, 2007). Traditionally, children would have engaged in imaginative play with siblings and neighbours, and would have

been much freer to play and explore the outdoors (Elkind, 2007; Jenkinson, 2001). In contemporary society, children are spending an increasing amount of time watching television, using computers, tablets and video games, and taking part in organised activities (Vickerius and Sandberg, 2006; Elkind, 2007; Kernan, 2007), with a significant portion of their day spent in childcare settings (Pobal, 2019). Their opportunities to engage in imaginative play at home with their peers have become much more limited. It is vital that early years practitioners (EYPs) understand the importance of imaginative play and facilitate it in their settings.

Literature reveals a rich body of research connecting imaginative play to the acquisition of specific skills (Bergen, 2002; Lillard et al., 2011; Hoffman & Russ, 2012) however, there is little research based on practitioners' perceptions of imaginative play, particularly in the Irish context. The purpose of this research, conducted in West Cork in the South West of Ireland, was to explore the perspectives of EYPs on imaginative play and to examine how and to what extent they promote it in their settings.

## **The Benefits of Imaginative Play**

The benefits of imaginative play have been widely discussed. Piaget (1962) believed that children learn about the world through a process of accommodating and assimilating information. During imaginative play children draw on their existing knowledge, take on new information and adapt themselves to it (Singer & Singer, 1990). Vygotsky (1978) asserted that during imaginative play children create their own 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), in which they can achieve tasks previously unobtainable. Imaginative play is linked to important cognitive skills such as symbolic understanding, problem solving, and divergent thought (Bergen, 2002; Lillard et al., 2011; Hoffman & Russ, 2012) and inextricably linked to creativity as children invent context, story and characters for their games (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). The time children spend in social pretend play enhances their overall social skills (Li et al. 2016) as they express themselves, listen to others, compromise, negotiate, solve problems, understand and follow rules (Vickerius and Sandberg, 2006). Imaginative play is a safe place for children to experiment with roles and scenarios and explore emotional responses to them. They learn to understand and regulate their own emotions, gain insight into other people's, and develop empathy (Singer & Singer, 1990; Hoffmann & Russ, 2012; Waite and Rees, 2014). It is important not to overlook the sense of happiness and well-being that imaginative play gives to children. According to Froebel (1887, p.55), play gives children 'joy, freedom, contentment, inner and



outer rest, peace with the world'.

## **Facilitating Imaginative Play in Early Years Settings**

Creating the right environment is important for imaginative play to flourish (Singer & Singer 1990; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). Waite and Rees (2014, p. 8) describe the 'ordered and beautiful' Steiner kindergarten, in which children enjoy the freedom to play. An environment for imaginative play should include a combination of open space and cosy corners, quiet and busy areas (Kernan, 2007; Bruce, 2011). Materials available to children have a significant effect on the quality of their play. Simple, open-ended materials leave much more to the imagination than detailed or fixed-task toys, which make it harder for children to engage in truly imaginative play (Jenkinson, 2001; Elkind, 2007; Bruce et al., 2008). The value of a rich outdoor environment, containing a balance of open and enclosed spaces and plenty of props and open-ended materials for imaginative play, should not be overlooked (Susa & Benedict, 1994; Jenkinson, 2001; Bruce et al, 2008; Li et. al., 2016).

The social environments in which children play are crucial; these include other children and adults surrounding the child and the atmosphere created (Singer & Singer, 1990; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). Adults should provide the freedom and permission for children to play and convey messages of valuing and respecting their play (Singer & Singer, 1990; Jenkinson, 2001; Waite & Rees, 2011). There is an ongoing debate regarding adult involvement with children's imaginative play. Steiner kindergarten teachers intervene as little as possible so as not to awaken children from 'the dreamy state of imaginative play' (Waite and Rees, 2014, p. 3). Some authors, however, suggest that by engaging with children in their play, adults can access Vygotsky's ZPD and scaffold children's learning (Kitson, 2010; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Fleeer, 2015).

## **The Irish Context**

While the Irish early years sector was initially developed with minimum government involvement, recent years have seen significant state attention, largely in response to a rapid increase in female work force participants (Clerkin, 2016). The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) funded pre-school year in 2011, extended to two years in 2016, dramatically increased the number of children attending pre-schools. In the 2017-2018 school year, 206,301 young children availed of the funded ECCE Scheme (Pobal, 2019). The number of children in full-time day care has also increased significantly and subsidies have been introduced for parents on low incomes (DCYA, 2017; Pobal

2017). The need for quality in Irish early years settings is now widely recognised and led to the publication of *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). Following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) by Ireland in 1992, children's rights to play and the importance of play for their well-being and development has been increasingly recognised in Irish policy.

*Síolta* and *Aistear* both promote learning through self-directed play, including 'pretend' and 'socio-dramatic' play (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009). There is, however, very little research into practice facilitating play, and particularly imaginative play, in Irish early years services. In a background paper to the development of *Aistear*, Kernan (2007) emphasised the importance of pretend play to enrich development. It was further suggested that there was a 'mismatch between vision of best practice in Irish ECCE in relation to play and current realities' (ibid, p. 15).

## Methodology

This study sought to explore the views of practitioners concerning imaginative play in Irish early years settings. The following research question guided the study: How do Early Years Practitioners perceive and facilitate imaginative play?

Underpinning this were the following research objectives:

- To examine participants' perspectives on what imaginative play is and the benefits of imaginative play to children's well-being and development.
- To explore the ways in which the participants feel the indoor and outdoor environments of their services, support imaginative play.
- To examine the extent to which free play is facilitated indoors and outdoors, enabling imaginative play to develop.
- To examine how participants, view the role of the adult in supporting children's imaginative play.

As the study was interested in practitioners' views and experiences, a qualitative research design was developed (Wisker, 2001; Mukherji & Albon, 2015). This included visits to services, the use of photographic data and open-ended interviews with participants, within the context of their workplace.

Sampling: A purposive sampling process (Quinn Patton, 2002; Robert-Holmes,

2014) was adapted to ensure participants would be representative of the variety of early years services in West Cork. Ten EYPs were selected from eight services, located in small towns and rural areas, which included sessional pre-schools for three to six-year olds and full day care services for children from six months. Services with various curriculum approaches including play-based, Steiner, and Montessori were selected. All participants had at least three years' experience in the early years sector, were working directly with children, and had experience of programme planning.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were carried out using prepared, open-ended questions which gave participants the opportunity to express their views, describe their experiences, and elaborate if they wished (Silverman, 2004; Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Interviews were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017; nine occurred within participants' workplaces so the researcher could relate their responses to their environments, with one participant preferring a neutral venue. The recorded and transcribed data was analysed using labelling and coding to identify recurring themes and information relevant to the research objectives (Bryman, 2012). As additional data, photographs were taken of the indoor and outdoor environments of the services which were analysed in conjunction with the interview data and linked to identified themes.

## Ethics

Ethical guidelines were followed which ensured informed consent, the right to withdraw from the study, anonymity, and confidentiality for all participants and services. Pseudonyms have been used in this article. The researcher has endeavoured to represent participants' comments and views accurately and to give a fair and unbiased account of the findings of this study.

## Results

This section presents a summary of the data collected, under headings based on the research objectives and includes quotes from **the participants**.

### What is Imaginative Play?

All the participants described imaginative play in similar ways. They spoke of role play, pretending, make-believe, and creating things with available materials. They described small world play with dolls, vehicles, and farms.

*They're the mum someday or the dad, they're chefs, they're shopkeepers,  
kings and queens (Méabh).*

## **Benefits of Imaginative Play**

All the participants felt that imaginative play is beneficial to children. Some felt strongly that imaginative play promotes all areas of children's development, whereas others could only name one or two areas.

*It's massive, it's complete holistic development with children. It touches on all  
aspects really (Emma).*

Benefits to children identified by the participants included: social and emotional development, including self-confidence, empathy, and the ability to understand feelings; problem solving and cognitive development; enhanced speech and language, creativity and expression; an understanding of the world around them; and greater body awareness and motor skill development.

*They learn to listen to others, to take turns, to share, to initiate the game.  
(Katie).*

*It gives them a better understanding as well, of different scenarios and  
different ways of life (Linda).*

*If they've got concerns they can't verbalise you'll see them acting out  
scenarios over the dolls (Katie).*

*It encourages them to think of different ways to do things (Miriam).*

Participants also commented that children engaged in imaginative play are relaxed, happy, and contented.

## **Indoor Environments**

Most of the indoor environments of the services were well resourced for imaginative play. Aspects of the environment which participants felt promoted imaginative play and which were widely available in the services included: enclosed areas; the 'home corner'; dressing up clothes; dolls and doll's houses; vehicles; animals and farms; and blocks and lego.

*Well, I think our best area is that little kitchen area, it's just where it all happens  
(Megan).*

*they love dressing up and becoming different characters (Méabh).*

Some practitioners talked about the benefits of simple open-ended materials including wooden blocks, coloured cloths, play frames for making dens, shells,

stones, and pine cones.

*they'll create things from these basic materials, from their own imagination  
(Lisa).*

However, open-ended materials in some settings were limited. Miriam felt the resources in the environment she worked in didn't promote imaginative play very well.

*there's just a lot of plastic toys and puzzles.... it might be better taking away  
the toys that maybe influence them and giving them more natural materials  
(Miriam).*

There was a big contrast between the Montessori and Steiner environments. Lisa, a Steiner kindergarten teacher, said:

*it's designed for it, all of the equipment is for imaginative play, it can be used  
in many different ways.*

While she did appreciate the value of imaginative play, Margaret, one of the Montessori teachers, felt that:

*its limited in a Montessori environment. I suppose the materials are meant to  
be used in a certain way ... as for dressing up things or anything like that ... it  
really wouldn't be part of a Montessori environment*

Although neither of the Montessori services had formal 'home corners', one of the settings had dressing up clothes, animals, and vehicles, materials that are often associated with imaginative play.

## Outdoor Environments

The settings' outdoor environments were varied in size and in use of natural versus artificial materials. Some were well resourced and others quite plain. The three participants who had more natural environments felt that they were very supportive of imaginative play.

*It's an incredible place for imaginative play, lots of trees and cosy areas (Lisa).*

However, several participants felt that their outdoor environments didn't support imaginative play very well.

*our outdoor area at the moment doesn't have a lot of materials out there  
(Emma).*

Resources that participants felt were beneficial for imaginative play outdoors included: play-houses and natural willow houses; play-kitchens; sand pits;

climbing structures; and ride on vehicles. Some services had several of these resources, but most only had one or two.

*The willow house that we have, that's used as an igloo or a teepee. (Katie).*

*there's the climbing frames ... that sometimes turn into a bus or a train or whatever (Méabh).*

*the sandpit becomes this incredible, it's almost like a landscape, there'll be castles and moats and rivers and they'll get branches and stick them in to be little trees. (Lisa).*

Only one of the participants said that she brought out props and materials for imaginative play from inside. None mentioned open-ended materials in relation to imaginative play outdoors and they were only evident in the more natural outdoor areas.

## Time

Most participants felt that children needed plenty of time for in-depth imaginative play to develop and some pointed out the need to be flexible with time.

*If children have too much of a short slot, they can never actually settle into anything (Caitríona).*

*If they are really absorbed in a game, we might give them some extra time before we tidy up (Lisa).*

In most of the services, children were given plenty of free-play time indoors during which they could engage in imaginative play. This ranged from 45 minutes to an hour-and-a-half in a three-hour session. However, this was a lot more limited outdoors. Most participants from the sessional services said that they would be outside for between 20 and 30 minutes, and even less in 'bad weather'. Only two participants said that they would be outside for 45 minutes or longer, and only one said that children were free to go from inside to out.

*we try to have staff indoors and outdoors, so the children are free to come and go (Katie).*

Several participants spoke about the need to balance time for free-play and time outdoors with facilitating other aspects of the curriculum such as adult led activities and circle time.

*It's very hard to fit everything into a session... (Margaret).*

Two participants said that they had reduced the length of their session from three-and-a-half hours to three hours to comply with the ECCE scheme and that this had impacted on the amount time spent outside.

## The Practitioners' Role

Most of the participants felt that the practitioners' role was to facilitate imaginative play, giving the children the freedom to play and follow their own interests. Some spoke about managing play that was becoming too 'wild', supporting children to resolve conflicts, and helping shy children to join in.

*it can be quite noisy and the strongest children can be the predominant play leaders, so encouraging the children to listen to each other and to respect each other (Katie).*

*If children are standing on the periphery that haven't got the confidence to take that step into the imaginary world. Then nurture them and lead them (Katie).*

Most participants felt that it is important not to overly interrupt or interfere with children's imaginative play.

*They've got their own little world and you might be putting something that would wreck it maybe (Caitríona).*

*If there is too much adult intervention, I think they won't let their imagination run away with them. (Méabh).*

Several participants felt that it was sometimes appropriate to join in with play, and that practitioners could extend children's learning by introducing materials, making suggestions, and asking open ended questions. However, some emphasised the need for care and others felt that adults should only join in with play when invited.

*you have to be careful and constantly aware that what you see isn't what they see (Margaret).*

One felt that:

*finding the balance between when to engage with them and when to let them be is fierce important (Ella).*

## Discussion

### Benefits

Without exception, the participants in this study felt that imaginative play is beneficial to children's development and their well-being. Although the depth of their knowledge was varied, their combined responses give a broad picture of the benefits of imaginative play. They most commonly spoke about children's social skills and highlighted the way children learn to communicate, listen to each other, co-operate, negotiate, and respect each other during pretend play, reflecting the views of Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) on the social benefits of imaginative play. Participants also referred to improvements in children's language development. Several authors highlight verbalisation and language as an important part of imaginative play, as children describe their ideas to each other (Singer & Singer 1990; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006).

Some participants mentioned connections between imaginative play and cognitive development. While none referred specifically to the use of symbolism (Singer & Singer, 1990), several spoke of children using materials to represent things in their games. Some referred to problem solving skills and others suggested that children learn to 'think of different ways to do things' (Miriam), often referred to as divergent thinking (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). Participants felt that imaginative play gives children opportunities to express themselves and develop their creativity and imagination; this is reflected in literature which describes children creating stories, characters, scenes, and costumes for their games (Jenkinson, 2001 (Hoffman & Russ, 2012;). Creative, divergent thinking children are likely to become creative, divergent thinking adults (Singer & Singer, 1990; Jenkinson, 2001; Waite & Rees, 2011). Practitioners also referred to the sense of relaxation and happiness imaginative play gives to children, described by Froebel in 1887, and highlighted by many authors since (Singer & Singer, 1990; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006).

Participants felt that imaginative play helps children to make sense of the world as they try out different scenarios and roles in their play, often imitating things that they have experienced. This is supported by the Piagetian view that during play children accommodate and assimilate information, imaginative play is a means to experiment with and understand new knowledge (Kitson, 2010). Steiner also believed that children use every day experiences in imaginative play to explore and make sense of them (Waite & Rees, 2011). Some participants felt that children learn to understand and express feelings and develop empathy



for others during imaginative play. Waite & Rees (2014) describe role play as a safe way for children to explore emotional responses to different situations, reflecting the Freudian view that children use play to work through anxieties or difficult experiences (Bruce, 1996). Some participants spoke about this and gave examples.

## Environments

The study showed that imaginative play is well supported in the indoor environments of most of the services, with a range of suitable props and materials, and open and enclosed spaces, available to the children. Photographic data, with the consent of service owners and managers, was used as tools to enhance interviews. All but two of the settings had a home corner and participants referred to it as 'central' to imaginative play. The benefits of simple, open-ended materials to inspire imaginative play are highlighted by several authors (Jenkinson, 2001; Bruce et al., 2008), with too many detailed or 'fixed task' toys potentially inhibiting imaginative play (Jenkinson, 2001; Elkind, 2007; Trawick et al., 2016). Two participants suggested that too many plastic toys and puzzles deter children from using their own imaginations. Some participants emphasised the value of materials such as wooden blocks, stones, shells, and coloured cloths, stating that children use them for imaginative play in 'many different ways', however, open-ended materials were not available in all participating settings. As these materials are easy to acquire and inexpensive these findings suggest a lack of awareness by some participants of their pedagogical value.

This research indicates a notable contrast between Steiner and Montessori environments in relation to imaginative play. Waite & Rees (2011) state that Steiner Kindergartens consider imaginative play central to children's development in the early years, whereas Montessori settings do not traditionally support imaginative play (Soundy, 2008; Lillard, 2013;). Participants from the Steiner-based settings felt that their environments were designed for imaginative play and emphasised its importance. Both Montessori teacher-participants appreciated the value of imaginative play; however, one of the services facilitated some imaginative play, whereas the other had no home corner, dressing up clothes or other materials intended for imaginative play. Matson (2015) suggests that Irish Montessori settings need to evolve to incorporate open-ended play and fantasy which is part of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The findings of this study indicate that some Montessori settings still do not promote or facilitate much imaginative play, whereas others incorporate it to a limited extent.

There is significantly less research on imaginative play outdoors (Susa & Benedict,

1994; Li et. al., 2016;), with the findings of this study indicating that imaginative play is promoted much less in the outdoor environments of early years services. A few of the outdoor areas visited were well resourced, but most were quite plain, and several participants felt that their outdoor environments could be improved to support more imaginative play. Literature outlines the virtues of a natural outdoor environment to inspire high quality imaginative play (Jenkinson, 2001; Bruce et al, 2008; Moser & Martinsen, 2010), as the three participants, who had more natural outdoor areas, felt that they supported imaginative play very well, referring to features such as trees and bushes creating natural enclosed spaces and structures to climb on. Resources that participants felt encouraged imaginative play included play houses, ride-on vehicles, sand pits, logs, and climbing frames, but these were not all available in many of the services.

Neill (2013) discusses the value of 'loose parts' and open-ended materials in outdoor environments, with Li et al. (2016) highlighting the importance of providing costumes and pretend play props outside. Loose parts are found to drive imagination and creativity, offering unbounded opportunities (Nicholson, 1972). Observations during the field work revealed little evidence of loose parts in many of the outdoor sites, and no participants mentioned such materials; only one discussed bringing props outside for imaginative play. Kernan (2007) states that it is valuable for children to be able to move freely from indoors to outdoors during play, but only one of the services facilitated this. These findings can be contrasted to Moser & Martinsen's (2010) work examining the outdoor environments of Norwegian kindergartens; these were seen as pedagogical spaces for play and learning and were well resourced with open-ended materials, enclosed areas and climbing structures, both natural and manufactured. The findings of this study indicate outdoor spaces are not used to extend young children's imaginative play, in most instances.

## **Time**

Young children need plenty of time to settle into imaginative play, and for in depth games to develop (Singer & Singer, 1990; Jenkinson, 2001; Bruce et al. 2008). Participants concurred with the literature, highlighting the importance of enough time as well as the need to be flexible with time so as not to cut short children's play. While most participants allowed plenty of time for children to engage in imaginative play indoors, there was a notable difference in the amount of free play time given outdoors. Participants admitted the scheduled 20 to 30 minutes of outdoor free play time is not enough time for high quality imaginative play to develop. Again, this can be contrasted to the Norwegian

study, where children spend up to three-quarters of their day outdoors (Moser & Martinsen, 2010). Elkind (2007) suggests that time for play is often cut short to facilitate other aspects of the curriculum. The time challenge to imaginative play was most acute in the sessional services, particularly in relation to the need to accommodate aspects of the curriculum such as adult led activities and circle time. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) refers to the need to balance adult and child led activities ,but participants often find there are 'not enough hours in the day' (Margaret). The introduction of the ECCE scheme had reduced the length of the session in two services by half-an-hour which had impacted the amount of time children spend outside. All settings accommodated plenty of free-play time indoors which suggests that facilitating adult led activities impacts on the time available to children outdoors. A slightly longer session would perhaps help resolve this issue.

## **The Role of the Adult**

Participants stated the need for adults to facilitate and manage imaginative play, giving children the freedom to follow their interests but stepping in if things get too 'wild', helping children resolve conflicts, and 'nurturing' children who find it harder to get involved. Waite and Rees (2011) describe the subtle way a Steiner Kindergarten teacher briefly enters the children's play to do this. The research findings reflect the debate in the literature as to how much adults should or should not get involved with children's imaginative play. Several participants felt that it was important not to interrupt or overly influence imaginative play, as this would disrupt the flow of children's games or impede their imagination. Jenkinson (2001, p.138) suggests that 'it is easy for us to shatter the fragile dream of children's play'. Some participants felt that adults could extend children's learning during imaginative play by introducing materials, making suggestions, and asking open ended questions. Some authors assert that adults should avail of opportunities to get involved with children's role play to access Vygotsky's ZPD and extend their learning (Kitson 2010; Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Still, others suggest harnessing these rich play opportunities to support shared understandings through co-constructed meaning making (Fleet, et al., 2017). Hakkarainen et al. (2013) warn that to do this successfully, adults need to become genuine play partners, and suggest this is a skill that needs to be learnt. Rogers & Evans (2006), however, suggest that imaginative play gives children important space away from adult influence and Singer & Singer (1990) point out that adults must know when to withdraw and leave children to their play. This study revealed the reflective capacity of practitioners to consider

how and why they might intervene, if at all, in children's imaginative play, with some participants highlighting the need for care when joining children's games and pointing out that we do not always see things in the same way they do. Ella, perhaps, summed this up when she suggested that 'finding the balance between when to engage with them or when to let them be is fierce important.'

## **Limitations**

The intent of this research was to explore, in a small scale, EYPs' views and engagement in imaginative play and therefore, it is not possible to generalise the findings or to apply them broadly to Irish early years services. As only two Montessori services were visited, more research would be needed to determine whether Montessori services promote imaginative play less than other philosophies. This research was carried out in the winter; in the summertime, a different picture of imaginative play outdoors may have emerged.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations arising from this research which could impact on Irish early years provision include:

- The need to privilege simple, open-ended and natural materials in early years environments to promote imaginative play.
- Greater consideration of imaginative play in the design of outdoor environments; providing enclosed spaces, natural environments, and loose parts.
- The need for children to spend more time outdoors to allow quality imaginative play to develop there.
- An extension to the ECCE session of half-an-hour; allowing practitioners to provide more time for imaginative play, especially outdoors, without it impacting other aspects of the curriculum.
- The adaption of some Montessori environments and methods to incorporate more imaginative play.
- The complex skills required to support quality imaginative play should be incorporated into training for early years practitioners.

Further research on imaginative play, in other parts of Ireland, would be valuable to examine these emerging findings. More research is also warranted

to explore to what extent Montessori services are adapting their environments and methods to incorporate imaginative and open-ended play, to align with Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Research into the perspectives of parents on imaginative play, and how it is facilitated in children's homes, would add to this field of study, as would research into how children play in different environments, both physical and social.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study shows a positive picture of provision for imaginative play in West Cork early years services, and illustrates some inspiring practice in this regard. Although some outdoor environments are supportive of imaginative play, a combination of a lack of appropriate resources and a limited amount of time spent outside indicates that others are underutilised. Considering the value of a rich outdoor environment to inspire imaginative play, this is a wasted opportunity in some services. The study also suggested that some Montessori services facilitate imaginative play to a lesser extent than those from other philosophical backgrounds. There is clearly a role for the adult in sanctioning, facilitating, and managing imaginative play and while there are opportunities for extending children's learning, it is also important not to interrupt, interfere with or overly influence the 'sacred' world of imaginative play. The reflective capacities of practitioners are relied on to know when and how to get involved and when to step back as this takes skill, understanding, care, and intuition.

This study demonstrates that early years practitioners have a wealth of knowledge that should not be underestimated. The combined knowledge and experiences of the participants gives a comprehensive picture of the benefits of imaginative play and of ways to facilitate it in early years settings. For the most part, the importance of imaginative play is evidenced by the practice found in West Cork early years services. However, there is still room for improvement in this area which is such an important part of young children's lives.

*It's so beautiful seeing the room fill with all this imaginative play. It's really nurturing for them. It's like food. (Lisa).*

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# Childhood Trauma in Mind: Integrating Trauma-informed Care in ECEC

**Maria Lotty**

## **Abstract**

Early childhood experience of trauma is highly prevalent and has far-reaching consequences. Young children are particularly vulnerable to experiencing trauma and children who enter foster care often have complex trauma related difficulties. In Ireland, many young children enter foster care each year and services to support their recovery are chronically under resourced. Early Childhood Education and Care Professionals are located in a unique position to provide children with crucial supports that may aid children's recovery and healing from trauma. This paper describes the impact of childhood trauma and how this may impact Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Then, it describes trauma-informed care, an approach that may support children's recovery from trauma and how it could be integrated into ECEC practices in the Irish context. The paper concludes that there is a need for trauma-informed care professional development for Early Childhood Professionals to support this. It is also recognising that the current research base to support this intervention is limited and thus, the need for more research is warranted.

## **Introduction**

Childhood trauma has been identified as a major public health problem worldwide (Felitti et al., 2019). In particular, the experience of childhood trauma of occurring in the context of the home has been identified as being extremely common (D'Andrea et al., 2012). The risk factors for early childhood trauma are also well established. These include child poverty, lone parenthood, parental drug or alcohol dependency, domestic violence, and parental mental health difficulties (Gilbert et al., 2012; Moullin et al., 2014). Research indicates that

young children are at particular risk to childhood trauma (Lieberman et al., 2011, Fusco and Fantuzzo 2009). In the USA, children under age 3 were found to have three times more the rate of children aged 16 and 17 (15 to 5 children per 1,000, respectively) to have experienced childhood trauma (Child Trends, 2019). The development of child protection and welfare systems identification and intervention of childhood trauma has led to increased rates of children received into care. Children in care most often have experience of chronic forms of abuse which include neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic violence (Pynoos et al., 2011). These experiences of abuse are often not only chronic, but prolonged, repetitive, cumulative, and overwhelming for these children and most importantly, are unrepaired (Spinazzola et al., 2005, , Cook et al. ,2005, Gabowitz et al., 2008, Greeson et al., 2011). The defining feature of this experience is that of occurring with the context of the interpersonal relationship between the child and caregiver, essentially a failure of caregiving attachment and attunement (Miller et al., 2000, Tarren-Sweeney, 2008; McAuley and Davis, 2009; Forbes et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2011, Kinsey and Schlosser, 2013; Kelly and Salmon, 2014; Hambrick et al., 2016). The link between the experience of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) trauma and mental health difficulties is well established. However, for children in foster care, they are more likely to be exposed to ACEs than their counterparts. They are up to seven times more likely to experience a parent incarcerated or a household member abuse substances (Turney and Wildeman, 2017). As a result, the prevalence of mental health difficulties is higher (Ford et al., 2007; Leslie et al., 2004).

## **Children in Care in Ireland**

In Ireland, in 2018, about 50 children per 10,000 population aged 0-17 years were in care, equating to 5974 children, not including children in respite arrangements and separated children seeking asylum (Tusla, 2018). 878 of these children were admitted to care in 2018; of these, over a quarter were repeated admissions (26%: 226) and for the remaining children, it was their first time admission (74%: 652) (Tusla, 2018). The majority of all children admitted were placed in foster care (90%: 791); 73% (638) with general foster carers, 19% (153) with relative foster carers, 6% (53) were placed in residential care and 4% (34) in other type placements such as special care. 50% (442) of these children were male and 50% (436) female. In 2018, for all children admitted, the most common age at admission was for children 1 year or less, accounting for 31% (181/878) of children. Pre-school children (aged 2- 4) accounted for 16% (143/878), young

children (aged 5-12) for 35% (310/878), and adolescents (aged 13-18) for 28% (244/878). The primary reasons for children's first time admission to care and primary reason for being in care indicated was neglect (45%, 45 %), followed by child welfare concerns (33%, 41 %). Physical abuse (10%, 6%), emotional (8%, 6%), and sexual abuse (3%, 2%) were also indicated (Tusla, 2018) (Table 1).

| Primary Reason         | Admission to Foster Care n (%) | Being in Foster Care n (%) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Neglect                | 296 (45)                       | 2675 (45)                  |
| Child Welfare Concerns | 216 (33)                       | 2452 (41)                  |
| Physical Abuse         | 67 (10)                        | 328 (6)                    |
| Emotional Abuse        | 55 (8)                         | 346 (6)                    |
| Sexual Abuse           | 18 (3)                         | 173 (2)                    |
| Total                  | 652 (99)                       | 5974 (100)                 |

**Table 1 Primary Reason for First Admission and Being in Foster Care**

Note: From "Annual Review on the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available 2018," by Tusla, Child and Family Agency, 2018, p. 37-65. Copyright 2018 by Tusla.

The responsibility for meeting the complex needs of these children falls between the services of the Tusla Child and Family Agency and CAMHS, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Ireland. However, the Independent Child Death Review Group (Shannon and Gibbons, 2012) identified specific failures in the Irish mental health services. These included weaknesses in sharing information between agencies, children's mental health needs not being clearly identified, delay or failure in assessment, and lack of service coordination. It highlighted the need for children in care to have comprehensive assessments. However, it still remains the case that children in care are not screened for mental health difficulties on entry to care which is routine practice in the UK for children over 4 years (Baginsky et al., 2017). Screening and assessment has been consistently highlighted as a prerequisite for children entering foster care to ensure that their needs are accurately assessed at the earliest stage and appropriate intervention put in place (Goemans et al., 2018, Griffin et al., 2011, Greeson et al., 2011).

However, accessing services, such as CAMHS, has become very challenging in practice, reflecting the chronically under resourced status of Irish mental health services for children in care (McNicholas et al., 2011; McElvaney et al., 2013; Lucey and Pol;2013). In Ireland, ECEC often play a critical role in the lives of children who have experienced trauma. Despite the growing body of literature, outside of Ireland, that supports the empirical understanding of early childhood trauma impact and prevalence, a gap exists in realising the potential role ECEC could play in meeting the needs of these children (Loomis, 2018; Bartlett and Smith, 2019). Worryingly, in Ireland, the experiences of childhood trauma is seldom acknowledged in early childhood education (Butler, 2019). Without appropriate professional development for Early Childhood Professionals the complex needs of these children may be misunderstood or not recognised in a ECEC setting. This paper firstly, describes the impact of childhood trauma and how this may impact ECEC. Then, it describes trauma-informed care, an approach that may support children's recovery from trauma and how it could be integrated into ECEC practices in the Irish context.

## **The Impact of Childhood Trauma**

Recent advances in neuroscience and attachment theory have led to a more comprehensive understanding regarding the impact of interpersonal trauma on child development (Teicher et al., 2010; De Bellis, 2010; Fisher et al., 2016; Nemeroff, 2016). The integrated and multidisciplinary conceptualisation of developmental trauma captures the extent of the impact of chronic interpersonal experience of trauma that occurs within the caregiving context (Van der Kolk, 2005; Cook et al., 2005; D'Andrea et al., 2012; Kisiel et al., 2014). This conceptualisation offers professionals a comprehensive understanding of trauma impact. It has been well received by professionals, it builds on professional's expertise, and provides a framework for understanding trauma impact (Lotty, 2019). Depending on the severity and complexity of their exposure to trauma, this can have a pervasive impact across a wide range of a child's functioning in the areas of attachment, biology, affect regulation, cognition, behavioural control, dissociation, and selfconcept ( Cook et al., 2003; V D'Andrea et al., 2012; D'Andrea et al., 2012; Van Der Kolk, 2015). Therefore, this conceptualisation accounts for the extent of the impact on a child's development and functioning (D'Andrea et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2005). The symptoms resulting from developmental trauma exposure in early life may incorporate those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but symptoms that extend beyond these may also be present (Cook et al., 2003). Children in foster

care were found to be three to five times more likely than children not placed in foster care to experience mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, behavioural or conduct problems, and Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Turney and Wildeman, 2017), and to have higher rates of PTSD (Greeson et al., 2011; Ai et al., 2013). However, the current lack of a single diagnosis that captures these children's symptomology (Van der Kolk and d'Andrea, 2010; Kisiel et al., 2014) poses a number of difficulties. These include: multiple diagnoses (Van der Kolk and d'Andrea, 2010), not meeting the criteria for PTSD (Pynoos et al., 2008; van der Kolk et al., 2009), or not meeting the criteria for any mental health disorders (Tarren-Sweeney, 2014), despite their significant trauma and attachment related difficulties. Of note here is that the criteria for PTSD are based on constructs that were originally framed from rigid psychopathology states in adulthood (Bremness and Polzin, 2014; Polzin, 2014). PTSD focuses on a single traumatic event not in the context of an attachment relationships. Because of the lack of clear diagnostic criteria, child welfare agencies are typically inclined to focus treatment on the presenting behaviour of the child, and not on the underlying presentations associated with developmental trauma (Cook et al., 2003; Greeson et al., 2011). Applying the concept of developmental trauma into child education and care practices offers an opportunity to increase understanding of the impact of chronic childhood interpersonal trauma, the nature of the challenges these children face, and to develop ways to intervene more effectively (Rittner et al., 2011; DeJong 2010; Greeson et al., 2011; Kisiel et al., 2014). This would involve ECEC services to become trauma-informed, developing a trauma-informed perspective to practice in order to best support children and their families (Pynoos et al., 2011).

## **The Impact of Trauma in an Early Childhood Education and Care Settings**

Removal of children from the source of maltreatment and trauma experience and the placement with foster carers may suggest that children will adapt to a new, safe environment. However, the impact of trauma, neurological changes developed as survival strategies while living in a threatening environment (Teicher et al., 2010), the process of adapting to an unfamiliar environment, can be challenging and slow for children. While they have been provided with a place of safety, the impact of previous experiences of trauma are on going and can be long-lasting (Cook et al., 2005). Difficulties may increase on coming into care such as externalized behaviours (Lawrence et al., 2006; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2013) that may be frightening, unmanageable, and appear bizarre. Research

indicates that in ECEC settings, including pre-schools, such externalized behaviours are associated with increased stress and emotional exhaustion for pre-school teachers (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2018). This is likely to have an impact on the Early Childhood Professional's capacity to meet these children's needs and promote positive relationships with the children (Whitaker et al., 2015). While these children have needs similar to other children (universal needs), they also have traumagenic needs (Bath et al., 2018) that need to be recognised and met by the Early Childhood Professional. Without specific understanding and knowledge of trauma-impact and intervention, children's presenting emotional and behavioural expression of these needs may be misunderstood; thus, leading to strategies that are inadvertently harmful (compounding trauma impact), or at the very least ineffective.

## **Supporting Children's Traumagenic Needs**

### **Trauma-informed Care**

Trauma-informed Care (TIC) has been influenced by the growing awareness of implications of early childhood trauma and the need to respond in effective ways (Yatchmenoff, 2015; Berliner and Kolko, 2016). This awareness was fuelled by a number of developments, the understanding of traumatic stress through research on the neurobiology of stress (Porges, 2011) and the impact of trauma on brain development (Riem et al., 2015). The Adverse Childhood Study (ACE) (Felitti et al., 1998) found strong associations between the impact of childhood trauma and long lasting consequences for health from an epidemiological perspective (Kelly-Irving and Delpierre, 2019). TIC subsequently emerged as an approach based on the integrative multidisciplinary understanding of the impact of childhood trauma to effectively respond to trauma. TIC as an approach can be described as incorporating four important elements which recognised the importance of;

- (1) the widespread impact of trauma and understanding of potential paths for recovery,
- (2) the signs and symptoms of trauma in children, families, and staff,
- (3) responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and
- (4) actively avoiding of re-traumatisation of children and the adults who care for them (SAMHSA, 2014).

Initially, TIC focused on the identification and development of trauma-specific evidence-based treatment (EBT) (Black et al., 2012; Fraser et al., 2013; Dorsey et al., 2017). However, attention shifted to the implementation of TIC in child welfare systems, as professionals and researchers were concerned that most children who come into contact with child welfare services often have chronic and complex trauma histories but do not receive mental health treatment (Strand and Sprang, 2018). The movement also recognised that in order to meet the complex needs of these children, a more systemic approach was needed. This has traditionally not been taken in addressing the impact of trauma on children and families (Ko et al., 2008; Beyerlein and Bloch, 2014). This has resulted in a paradigm shift away from a traditionally deficit orientated understanding of trauma that individualises the person's difficulties and minimises the wider contextual influences, towards a more compassionate and contextualised standpoint (Knight, 2015). TIC is concerned with issues of social justice, power relationships, and human rights (Tseris, 2018), placing the response to trauma within a strengths-based framework that considers the person's broader ecological context. This is often captured in the literature as a shifting away from the question 'what is wrong with you?' towards the more empathetic question 'what has happened to you?' (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). By 2004, the National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), in the USA, was applying the concepts of TIC to Trauma-informed child welfare systems (TICWS) that led to a definition of a TICWS. TICWS is identified as a system:

In which all parties involved recognise and respond to the varying impact of traumatic stress on children, caregivers and those who have contact with the system. Programs and organizations within the system infuse this knowledge, awareness and skills into their organizational cultures, policies, and practices. They act in collaboration, using the best available science, to facilitate and support resiliency and recovery (Chadwick Trauma-Informed Systems Project 2013: 11).

The definition focuses not only on children, but also their caregivers and the child welfare workforce who seek to support them. It recognises that all of these groups are affected by trauma, including primary traumatic experiences that they may have experienced and the exposure to secondary trauma by caring for or working with children and families that have experienced trauma. The definition goes beyond the development of knowledge and awareness of trauma impact, but emphasises the need for the system to apply that knowledge in daily practices, in the culture of the organisation, and in interagency partnerships such as ECEC. Further to this, six practice guiding principles were developed

by SAMHSA (2014) to underpin the approach: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment and humility, and responsiveness (recognition of cultural, diversity and historical trauma issues). Thus, TIC is strongly aligned to the values of ECEC practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

TIC interventions can be carried out by professionals and carers, outside a formal clinical setting, by those working with, and caring for, children in roles such as early childhood education and care settings. These types of interventions have three main components (Bath, 2015) and were first identified by Van der Kolk (2005), and later by Bath (2008). Namely:

- 1) developing the child's sense of safety
- 2) promoting healing relationships between the child and caregiver and
- 3) teaching self-management and coping skills.

These three "pillars" lay the foundations for supporting the child in engaging in a formal therapeutic relationship, if required (Bath, 2008; Bath, 2015). Neuroscientific research provides evidence that children who are exposed to developmental trauma have impairment of their self-regulation capacities (Frewen and Lanius, 2006; Dale et al., 2009; Teicher et al., 2010, Schore, 2015.). This impairment is linked to emotional and behavioural difficulties (Racusin et al., 2005; Brendtro et al., 2009; Siegel, 2015). Thus, enhancing professionals' and caregivers' capacities to support the child to develop self-regulation has become the overarching key component of these interventions (Racusin et al., 2005; Dozier et al., 2006; Gunnar and Fisher, 2006; Schore, 2009; D'Andrea et al., 2012; Van Der Kolk, 2015). The phased approach seeks to ensure the foundations are laid out and then built upon to support the child in his or her recovery.

### **The first phase:**

focuses on building the child's feeling of safety (pillar 1). The target of developing "felt" safety aims to support the child in developing arousal and affect regulation and reduce reactive fear based behaviours (Steele, 2008; Teicher et al., 2010; Nolte et al., 2011; Nemeroff, 2016; Shonkoff 2016). Developmental trauma involves prolonged and repeated exposure to trauma which serves to impair the stress arousal system (Porges, 2011). This results in emotional and behavioural difficulties that stem from pervasive biological and emotional dysregulation. Owing to the plastic nature of the stress arousal system in the brain (Roozendaal et al., 2009), it can be positively influenced by intervention



(Slopen et al., 2014). Addressing the child's dysregulated arousal system is the avenue to addressing attachment and cognitive based difficulties (Cook et al., 2003; Bath, 2008; Courtois and Ford, 2009; Bath, 2015).

### **The second phase:**

is focused on building a trusting relationship between the foster carer and the child (pillar 2). This is built on the ongoing development of supporting the child to experience a feeling of safety (biological, emotional and psychological). The focus is to provide ongoing positive experiences of attunement communication that build affect regulation and secure attachment (Fonagy et al., 2007; Schore and Schore, 2008; Ford and Courtois, 2009; Siegel, 2015). Here, the focus is on promoting organized attachment behaviour/addressing the child's disrupted attachment system. This relationship provides the scaffolding to support the child's socio-cognitive development.

### **The third phase:**

The focus is on developing positive coping skills in the child (pillar 3), including emotional and cognitive regulation (Bath, 2015). This involves further identifying the child's unmet developmental needs. These unmet needs have stemmed from a lack of basic development skills resulting from interpersonal trauma exposure in the child's early development (Bosquet Enlow et al., 2012). This may include the basic foundations of executive functions (working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility). This stage focus is on addressing the child's needs by building coping skills, through trusting relationships with the foster carers and others. Over time, the focus is to support the child build a coherent sense of personal identity and competence.

## **Trauma-informed Care and Early Childhood Education and Care Professionals**

Early Childhood Professionals are located in a unique position where they can provide crucial supports for children who have experienced trauma (Loomis, 2018). TIC, essentially a relational regulatory approach aligns well with ECEC guidelines for good practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009). Early Childhood Professionals are well placed to provide children with TIC through supporting children's experience of a feeling of safety, develop trusting relationships with them, and supporting children to develop coping skills. In ECEC settings such as pre-schools, professionals may support felt safety through providing children with emotional containment (Douglas, 2007),

routine, predictability, and promoting a sense of control from a trauma-informed perspective. This may involve the recognition of children's trauma triggers and supporting them when they are overwhelmed by emotions and behaviours. ECEC may support children by using de-escalation techniques, desensitising children, and developing children's strategies to cope with trauma triggers. They can also give attention to the ECEC environment, reducing sensory insensitivity and promoting a sense of safety in the classroom/care setting.

Building trusting relationships with children being at the core of ECEC practice is also a fundamental component of providing TIC. The Early Years Professional is already placed to build healthy relationships with children in their care (Gillespie and Hunter, 2011). Thus, the Early Years Professionals could integrate their existing understanding of relational practice into the context of understanding the impact of developmental trauma on the attachment system. In the context of an understanding of attachment trauma, TIC seeks to create positive experiences of intersubjectivity and attunement (Trevarthen, 2001) for children as often as possible in the everyday interactions. The emphasis on the importance of the role of play in ECEC practice (Gonzales-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 2009) fits well here as play is viewed as an important vehicle for children's recovery from trauma (Terr, 2011). However, approaching play with children who have experienced trauma requires consideration, given that often these children may have little or no experience of healthy play (Gaskill and Perry, 2014). Children may feel threatened by the close proximity of an adult in a play-based context. Thus, using a trauma lens is likely to support a more thoughtful reflective approach to interacting with children, using approaches such as non-directive child led play. Non-directive child led play may support the child's experience of trust, security, and reduce stress (Solter, 2013), and provide children the opportunity of positive relational experiences that support child development from a trauma-informed perspective.

Developing coping skills also requires a trauma lens for children who have experienced trauma. This involves approaching supporting children to develop coping skills with a developmentally sensitive perspective. Children who have experienced trauma often may be developmentally 'younger' than their chronological age owing to the prolonged and chronic nature of developmentally traumatising experiences. ECEC has a central role in children's development (Davies, 2010). For example, ECEC emphasises emotional and social development, both areas of child development that often has been impacted by early childhood trauma (Burns et al., 2010). Research has indicated that young children who have experienced trauma have difficulties

with the facial recognition of emotions (Pollak et al., 2000). Thus, ECEC could provide meaningful supports to children's social and emotional development who have experienced such gaps in these areas of their development. ECEC also could support children's behaviour regulation, by recognising trauma related behaviour and subsequently responding using trauma-informed care behavioural strategies that support emotional regulation and the child-carer relationship (Siegel and Bryson, 2016).

Language development is also a key area where ECEC support children. This is also very relevant for children who have experienced trauma, as language development is also an area often impacted by early childhood trauma (Bartlett and Smith, 2019). These core coping skills, addressing gaps in children's development, are only developed in the context of trusting relationships and a sense of safety. While the Early Childhood Professional has the opportunity to provide children with TIC in their role, without specific training in TIC, they are unlikely to have the knowledge and understanding of the impact of childhood trauma. Thus, they may have difficulty in recognising trauma related behaviours and, in turn, be unable to respond in effective ways using evidenced-based practices. TIC is underpinned by the core component that professionals do not retraumatise, however, without specific training, professionals are at risk of inadvertently re-traumatising and further compounding children's difficulties (SAMHSA, 2014).

ECEC also have the unique position to support healthy relationships between children and their caregivers (Gillespie and Hunter, 2011) as experts in early childhood education and care. They are also key stakeholders in foster care as they are often important members of the team around the child within the foster care system (Lotty, forthcoming). In a recent doctoral study that developed an effective TIC intervention for foster carers in Ireland (Lotty, Dunn-Galvin and Bantry-White, 2020), one of the key recommendations of the study was to develop trauma-informed care training for key stakeholders in the lives of children in foster care, which include the Early Childhood Professionals. It is likely that by increasing Early Childhood Professionals capacity to recognise trauma related behaviours and provide trauma-informed care, this will also support children's foster families. It is more likely to promote collaborative practices between Early Childhood Professionals and foster carers, aligning with the principles of trauma-informed foster care (Lotty, 2019) and ECEC guidelines for good practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

The research base to support TIC in ECEC programmes is limited (Bartlett et al.,

2017; Loomis 2018). However, there are some examples of promising practices in the USA (Bartlett and Smith, 2019). TIC training and mentoring provided to ECEC professionals and evidenced based clinical treatment to children through partnerships with mental health services resulting in improvement in child behaviour (Holmes et al., 2015), academic achievement, socio-emotional competence, and reduced symptoms of child PTSD (Jaycox, 2011). Kanine et al., (2018) recently reported effectiveness of a TIC intervention that increased pre-school teachers' capacity to provide children with TIC in the classroom and increased child socioemotional skills.

## Conclusion

Early childhood trauma is prevalent and far-reaching. In Ireland, many young children enter foster care each year who have endured developmentally traumatising experiences. The resources that are needed to address early childhood trauma are overstretched and chronically under resourced in Ireland. Trauma-informed Care is an approach that may support children's amelioration from early childhood trauma that can be provided by the professionals and carers such as Early Years Professionals. The core components of TIC align well with ECEC practices and could be integrated into existing practices. While, the research base to support TIC in ECEC settings is limited and there is an urgent need for more research some promising interventions are emerging. These interventions included the component of ECEC professional development in understanding and application of TIC. To conclude, the ECEC professionals are in a unique position to provide children with TIC and make a contribution to children's recovery and healing from trauma. Thus, developing the capacity for Early Childhood Professionals to have both the knowledge and skills to provide children with trauma-informed care should be an important consideration.

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# Standardised Testing of Young Children by Stealth: Interrogating the Implications of the International Early Learning Study

**Mary Maloney**

## **Abstract**

Scientific research over the past 30 years strongly suggests that the most critical period of human development is from birth through to eight years old. During this period of early childhood, learning occurs at a pace that is unrivalled at any other time in a child's development, resulting in sound physical and mental health, social and emotional competence, and cognitive skills that lay the foundations for success well into adulthood. To master these skills, children need environments that support and promote play, and provide opportunities for exploration, hands-on, relevant and meaningful learning experiences (e.g., National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009); Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, (CECDE, 2006); Ministry of Education NZ, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). Early Childhood Education and Care services are considered appropriate sites that facilitate and support children's learning and development through playful learning experiences and opportunities. However, the days of learning through play may be numbered, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pilots a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes, involving the testing of 5 year old children in 3 participating countries –England, Estonia, and the USA. This paper explores the implications of this International Early Learning and Well-being Study (OECD, 2016), arguing that it will result in a mini PISA (International Student Assessment academic) where young children's academic achievements will take centre stage, leading to international rankings, and pressure for early childhood settings to prioritise targets and outcomes, and, thus become more school-like.

## Introduction

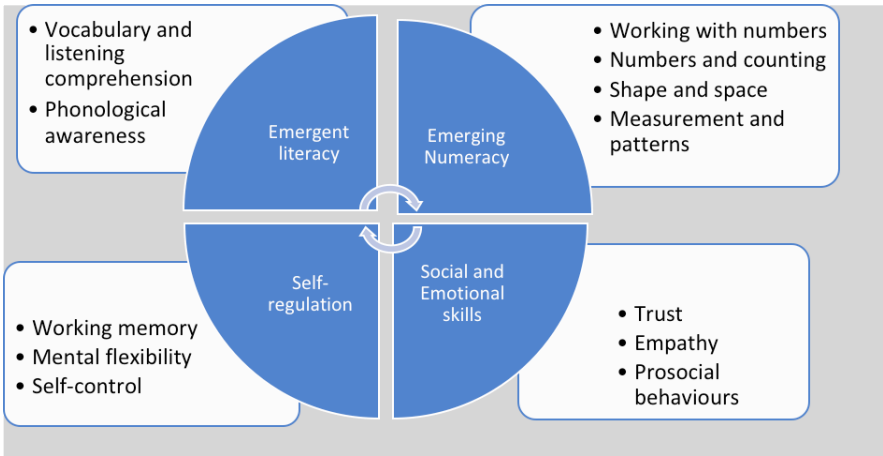
In 1998, the OECD Education Committee launched a Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care, resulting in two reports: *Starting Strong 1* (2001) and *Starting Strong 11* (2006). Both reports provided a comparative analysis of ECEC across OECD countries, and focussed on improving the quality of, and access to, provision, while being mindful of the diversity and complexity of systems, curricula, and pedagogical approaches across countries. While highlighting the need for strong and equal partnership with the education system, they denounced systems that focused on cognitive development, and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and dispositions in the early years, which they considered 'poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children' (OECD, 2006, p.13). Interestingly, as noted by Moss, Dahlberg, Grieshaber et al. (2016, p.344), the focus and tone of subsequent OECD reports represented a significant shift in their approach to ECCE towards 'a discourse of outcomes and investments'. Consequently, *Starting Strong 11* (2011) offered a 'quality toolbox for ECEC', with *Starting Strong 1V: Monitoring Quality in ECEC* (2015), suggesting that governments should regularly monitor and evaluate ECCE, staff performance, and children's development in order to boost standards. The concept of accountability, clearly linked to 'return on investment', had moved centre stage. However, the purpose of ECCE is about much more than preparing children for school. It must support children's holistic development in order to establish a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Moreover, ECCE offers the 'possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens' (UNESCO, 2020). All of this can be achieved through play which is internationally recognised as supporting children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual wellbeing, and health (Lester & Russell, 2008, 2010). Indeed, Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds the right of all children to rest and leisure, and to engage in play and recreational activities. Likewise, the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA, 2013) identify play as one of children's basic rights, whereas the UNCRC General Comment No. 7 (2013) reinforces the view of children as rights' holders, maintaining that the early childhood period is critical to the realisation of these rights. Accordingly, this paper argues that the International Early Learning and Well-being Study (IELS, OECD, 2016), which involves standardised testing of young children, will considerably undermine the child's right to play. It suggests that the IELS will lead to a 'mini PISA', with the associated risk that play will be replaced by test preparation in early childhood settings as they strive to improve young children's

academic achievement.

International Early Learning Study

The OECD’s attempt to consolidate its paradigm shift towards outcomes and investments is evident within the International Early Learning and Well-Being Study (IELS), a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes, involving comparative testing of 5 year old children across countries. The IELS, which was piloted with 1200 children in England, Estonia, and the USA in 2017 (OECD, 2018), utilises tablet-based direct assessments of the children and questionnaires to collect information from each sampled child’s parent(s) or carer(s), and the teachers or staff members who know the child best (Dept. for Education (DfE, 2018). The questionnaires also collect information on the children’s individual characteristics, home environment and background, and early education experiences (DfE, 2018). Figure 1 provides an overview of the domains under which children are assessed.

Figure 1. Domains assessed by the IELS



According to the OECD, these domains ‘represent a balance of both cognitive and social and emotional skills’ (2016, p. 18). On the face of it, they seem benign. However, cognisant that the children involved are 5 years old, the finer detail associated with these domains (Table 1) is disconcerting.

**Table 1. Detail associated with domains of assessment**

|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Self-Regulation                     | Self-control, grit, self-management and conscientiousness   |
| Oral language                       | including the:<br>Sounds produced while speaking (phonemes)<br>Rules a given language requires to construct sentences (syntax),<br>and<br>Understanding that concepts have meaning (semantics)  |
| Emergent literacy                   | children’s knowledge of print, letters and sounds, which will help them to learn to decode and read for meaning, building upon oral language skills   |
| Numeracy                            | ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts. It comprises the ability to identify and understand numbers as well as computational skills, ie the ability to count and to perform simple arithmetical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and compare numerical magnitudes |
| Executive function                  | Children’s ability to regulate attention, including controlling reactions to new stimuli, working memory and planning, which are also associated with later academic development  |
| Self-Awareness/<br>Locus of control | children’s own beliefs about whether they possess the ability to complete tasks, and encompasses aspects such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and locus of control   |
| Social Skills                       | pro-social behaviour and sociability. Within this domain children will be assessed on their ability to take the perspective of another, to demonstrate prosocial behaviour (i.e. showing kindness, sharing, co-operation, and respect for others), agreeableness and empathy (OECD, 2016, P.18-20).                 |

A closer examination of some of these domains highlights the unreasonable expectations of children participating in the IELS. Take self-regulation, and use of the term ‘grit’ and ‘conscientiousness’, for example. The psychologist, Angela Duckworth, who studied grit as a personality trait, defined it as ‘perseverance and passion for long-term goals’. Dictionary definitions invariably place grit along five particular dimensions: courage, conscientiousness, endurance, resilience, and excellence. The appropriateness of ‘testing’ 5-year-old children in these dimensions is highly questionable.

In relation to Numeracy, the OECD (2016) define it as the ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts. Again, although this definition appears quite innocuous and indeed, reasonable, it underscores the associated complexity which requires young children to have the 'ability to identify and understand numbers as well as computational skills, i.e., the ability to count and perform simple arithmetical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and compare numerical magnitudes' (OCED, 2016, p18-20). All of this by age 5. Can such testing be construed as suited to young children's psychology and natural learning strategies? (OECD, 2006) It is inconceivable that the OECD think so.

Let there be no misunderstanding that comparative education represents a narrow reductionist interpretation of education, as well as a considerable shift away from the concept of holistic child development, which recognises that children are not divided up into separate domains, learning styles, intelligences, attitudes, dispositions or creativities. The IELS is, in fact, at odds with international early childhood curricula in Finland, Ireland, Scotland, and New Zealand for instance, each of which emphasise the integrated nature of children's learning and development throughout early childhood, and purport a playful pedagogy throughout the early years. Urban & Swadener (2016, p. 12) argue that the approach suggested by the IELS actively contradicts the rights of children, families, and communities to meaningful participation in all matters concerning and affecting the upbringing and education of young children. They conclude that the kind of standardised assessment and ranking proposed is not going to provide a meaningful basis for achieving more just and equitable outcomes for children, families, and the wider community. Resources will be diverted from much needed local and national improvement processes to creating a largely meaningless international league table instead (Urban and Swadener, 2016 p. 10). Drawing upon Foucaultian theory, the IELS represents a 'regime of truth'- one world view, as if it were the only absolute truth, generating 'an authoritative consensus about what needs to be done...and how it should be done (Cohen, 2008, p. 9) discounting other perspectives or world views. Is it, as suggested by Morris (2016, p.2), a case of:

the west... Exporting its vision of schooling around the world through the auspices of cross-national tests supported by the modern missionaries and camp followers of our time: the think tanks and multinational companies who specialize in identifying and delivering 'what works'.

## Teaching to the Test in Early Childhood

There is little doubt that 'what works' in early childhood is inextricably linked with competent systems which unfold in relationships between individuals, institutions, and governance, based on shared knowledge, practices, and values (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, et al., 2011). Such an approach is arguably far removed from standardised testing of young children. Rather than testing children, Aistear: the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland, for example, supports the notion of assessment: the 'ongoing process of collecting, reflecting on, and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning' (NCCA, 2009, p.72). Accordingly, the adult working with the young child 'uses the assessment information to give on-going feedback to children about how they are getting on in their learning, to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences for them, to choose appropriate supports for them, and to document, celebrate and plan the next steps in their learning' (ibid., p. 73).

Undertaken in this way, assessment is a natural and integral aspect of a systems approach to ECCE. It benefits, involves, and makes sense for children; it includes families, is multi-modal, happens over time, and celebrates the breadth and depth of children's learning and development (NCCA, 2009). Regrettably, with its focus on rankings of ability across particular skills, the IELS will result in an inevitable erosion of informal learning in early childhood, a move away from play based pedagogy to a pedagogy of compliance, a re-emergence of rote, and forced learning, and a push-down formalised curriculum, where children risk being pitted against each other as governments scramble to increase rankings. The IELS will result in standardised testing of children at all levels of education, from early childhood through to third level. This intention is clearly signalled by the OECD (2016), who state that: In time, the information [gathered] can also provide information on the trajectory between early learning outcomes and those at age 15, as measured by PISA (p. 103)...The second relationship with PISA is to enable countries to link early learning outcomes to the capabilities of the same cohort of students at age 15 (p.110) Commenting on England's participation in the IELS, the DfE (2018:5) also signify the intention to provide valuable and internationally comparable statistical evidence on children's early learning and development, which we know is important for educational attainment throughout childhood and later life.

Is this what academics, parents, educators, teachers want for our young children? It behoves all of us to consider how the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has altered the educational landscape for children



in secondary education globally. Because of international rankings in math, science, and reading, education systems around the world are now primed for competition. School performance is rated, placing pressure on principals, teachers, and children. Accordingly, there is a tendency to prioritise children's academic achievement. The concern is that the IELS will result in similar downward pressure for children accessing ECEC services. The function of metrics and measurements, as proposed through the IELS, is to provide competitive comparisons' or 'comparison advocacy' harnessed to the task of winning imaginary contests and competitions, such as the global 'war for talent', the 'education race', and 'skills race' (Morris, 2016, p.3), but at what cost to children?

During a TED talk in February 2017, Ken Robinson argued that 'kids don't fail, schools fail kids', a claim that resonates with Malaguzzi's assertion that although children have one hundred languages (i.e., their endless potentials, their ability to wonder and to inquire, and multiple ways of seeing and being), school and culture rob them of ninety-nine. Although this may be an unjust critique of the education system globally, the reality is that regardless of a teacher's best intentions, the IELS will result in teaching to the test, both inside and outside the classroom at both pre-school and early primary level.

### **Exacerbating Educational Disadvantage and Inequality**

- In justifying the IELS, the OECD (2016) assert that information on early learning outcomes, could provide parents with reliable information on a range of factors including:
- Practical activities they can undertake with their child to make a significant difference to their learning and make the most from their ECEC and schooling experiences;
- The age at which it would be beneficial to enrol their child in an ECEC setting and what is likely to be best in terms of intensity, duration, and continuity;
- The kinds of capabilities their child should be building, in social, emotional and. cognitive domains (OECD, 2016, p.104).

Herein lies a conundrum. Is it not more likely that parents with greater social capital, access to resources, and wherewithal to access appropriate support, and quality ECEC for their child, will yet again have a 'competitive advantage' over parents and families living in poverty, or suffering from socio-economic disadvantage? The IELS may well set children up for failure as early as 5 years. Likewise, parents whose children do not 'make the grade' will feel equally

incompetent. The narrow definition of the context of children's lives in the IELS leaves little room for considering existing inequality as a factor that influences measurement of the learner. This, in itself, is inequitable and points to a lack of awareness of the social, cultural, economic, and political diversity of families and contexts.

## **Schoolification of ECEC**

Given the age cohort (5 year olds) identified for assessment by the OECD, the potential expectation that these young children should be engaging in formal academic activities within early childhood education and care settings, prior to school entry, is worrying. Has the OECD forgotten or chosen to overlook its critique and denouncement of ECEC programmes that were underpinned by primary school academic activities in 2006? (see *Starting Strong 11*, 2006). From a children's rights stance, nation states must resist the "schoolification" of ECEC, where programmes place an inordinate focus upon cognitive development, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and where children spend much of their time indoors, learning letters and numbers in preparation for primary school (Pantazis and Potsi, 2012, Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, et al. 2015), rather than the development of social skills, independence, curiosity, and child-agency (NCCA, 2009; PACEY, 2013).

While testing of children may appear attractive for governments as they rationalise investment in ECEC, early introduction to academic learning is unnecessary and can negatively impact children's development (Claxton, 2008; House, 2012). In fact, a recent report from England, *Baseline Assessment: Why It Doesn't Add Up*, indicates that the data provided by standardised testing of young children has little or no statistical value (Bradbury, Jarvis and Cathy Nutbrown, 2015). Furthermore, when programme expectations "focus primarily on knowledge and skills acquisition, important dispositions are often ignored" (Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Haughey, 2007, p.3). As observed by Palmer (2009, p. 1),

It's time we recognised that too much too soon isn't working. To give our under-sevens the best chance of growing up bright, balanced and literate we must stop trying to fast-forward their education. .

## **Let Children Play**

As previously discussed, a child's right to play is upheld through Article 31 of UNCRC, the UNCRC General Comment No. 7 (2006) and EECERA (2013). Nonetheless, this right is all too often ignored as governments scramble to

increase international rankings. Any such ranking and competitive approach in early childhood would be a travesty for children. Among a myriad of factors that preclude the integration of play in ECEC programmes is a lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts. As noted by UNICEF (2018, p.15), 'education officials and staff, as well as administrators and principals, may not realize the critical role of play in building young children's understanding of mathematical, scientific and literacy concepts'.

Could it be that the OECD no longer believes in play as the most appropriate mechanism to support children's learning, or is it too difficult a concept to 'sell' internationally in light of consistent underinvestment in ECEC worldwide? Hence the paradigm shift towards a discourse of outcomes, investment, and accountability. UNICEF calls for a coordinated systems approach to remove obstacles and integrate play consistently into ECEC programmes. In doing so, it has developed a conceptual framework that emphasises the complex nature of ECEC, and outlines key enabling factors in the policy environment as well as five action areas that contribute to an effective ECEC sector. Figure 2 presents a visual summary of the framework, and highlights the guiding principles of equity, efficiency, responsiveness, and the importance of co-ordination across national, sub-national, and local levels of the ECEC sector.

With regards to policies and legislation, UNICEF indicates that policies that are specific to ECEC are central to affirming a child's right to play, and stating that play-based learning is 'a distinctive and essential feature of effective early learning' (2018, p.17).

In terms of public demand, awareness-raising must focus on children's unique learning needs in early childhood, the need to make meaning through playful experiences with the support of knowledgeable teachers (NCCA, 2009; UNICEF, 2018). A key aspect of fostering public support and demand for learning through play is to ensure that parents recognise their role in providing and supporting play experiences in the home, and empowering them to do so (UNICEF, 2018). Similar sentiments permeate First 5, a whole of Government Strategy for babies, young children and their families in Ireland (Govt. Ireland, 2018). Garnering public support and demand for learning through play will enhance the ECEC sector's commitment to, and recognition of, the benefits of play for young children (UNICEF, 2018).



**Source: UNICEF, 2018**

As shown in Figure 2, ministerial leadership that is aware of and/or committed to the value of playful approaches to teaching and learning in early childhood can give visibility to these issues and pressure, co-ordinate, and promote this philosophical continuity across pre-primary and primary education. Naturally, a well-resourced system is vital, and as stressed by UNICEF; public and private investments should take account of essential financing for appropriate learning materials, equipment, and professional supports that emphasise play where possible. They further stress that, in the context of limited finances, funding estimates for pre-primary education should be based on achieving pedagogical goals. The underlying message, which is reflected in Ireland's practice frameworks, *Siolta* and *Aistear*, is clear; play is essential to children's learning and development. The voice of the child, which is embedded within *Aistear*, stresses the critical importance of play for children's learning and development:

When I play, I use my body, my mind, my feelings, and my senses.  
Give me opportunities to develop my play. Watch how I play,

and see how you can support me. When I play with them I learn about co-operation, about how to deal with conflict, about how others think and feel, and what different actions and things mean (NCCA, 2009, p.11)

Contrary to testing children, leading to international metrics and comparisons, it is imperative that governments refocus their attention towards playful pedagogy which makes learning more relevant, meaningful, enjoyable and positive for children. Again, the voice of the child in Aistear asks educators and teachers to:

involve me in lots of meaningful, hands-on experiences in order to learn, to develop, and to become independent. I use my hands, my ears, my eyes, and my body to explore the objects, places and people in my world. Allow me the freedom to explore and to do things for myself (NCCA, 2009, p.11).

## Conclusion

There is little doubt that the IELS represents a considerable shift in the OECD's approach to ECEC, from a focus on quality (1998 to 2006) towards a discourse of outcomes, investment, and accountability (2011 to present). The IELS does not take account of children's natural learning styles and abilities in the early years, focusing instead on international rankings of ability across particular skillsets. Doubtless, it will lead to standardised testing of children, beginning in early childhood. This is a regressive step in the history of the OECD's overall positive relationship with ECEC. The risk is that ECEC will become increasingly schoolified, with the resultant erosion of play, and a re-emergence of rote learning. Educators will engage in a pedagogy of compliance, teaching to the test, rather than celebrating children's exploration, discovery, mastery, fun, and joyful learning, which is central to learning in early childhood. Equally, parents will feel pressured to prepare children for standardised testing. While they now read bedtime stories to their young children, will they, in the future, feel compelled to introduce letters and numbers and test their child's knowledge and skills acquisition?

Not only will the IELS set young children up for failure from the youngest age, parents whose children do not 'make the grade' will feel equally incompetent. Rather than attempting to fast-forward children's education (Palmer, 2009), it is time to put play back into ECEC, and redirect attention towards competent systems. In fact, the OECD must revisit its original concern for quality, and move away from approaches that are poorly suited to the psychology and natural

learning strategies of young children (OECD, 2006), and which pose a threat to the nature period and the very essence of early childhood itself, which is premised on relevant and meaningful experiences.

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# The Potential of Play: to Support the Development of Relationships among Young Children on the Autism Spectrum

**Christina O' Keeffe & Sinéad McNally**

## **Abstract**

Play is an integral aspect of early childhood and the vehicle through which young children develop lifelong social interaction skills (Barnett, 2018). For pupils on the Autism Spectrum (AS), differences in social communication are compounded by challenges in accessing play opportunities (Wolfberg, Bottema-Beutel & DeWitt, 2012). Such difficulties potentially further exacerbate feelings of isolation (Hess, 2006) and may inhibit the development of social interaction skills and formation of friendships (Kasari et al., 2016). This paper argues for a renewed focus on how best to support play opportunities for young children on the AS in order to promote social relationships and opportunities for learning and development.

## **Understanding Play**

Play has been identified as a fundamental feature of early childhood, dating back to the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. While play is universally recognised across cultures (Smith & Vollstedt, 1985), developing an operational definition of play proves challenging for researchers. Many formalised definitions have been identified in the literature, yet these descriptions vary considerably. Researchers attribute this contention to the paradoxical nature of play (Dyson, 2008; Zosh et al., 2018), whereby it has been described as both active and passive; solitary and social; free and structured (Eberle, 2013; Wood, 2013). In addition, theorists from wide ranging disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology and education have attempted to define play within their specialised field of research (Ferreira, 2015). This has resulted in

narrow perspectives of play, in stark contrast to its inherent complexity, diversity and ambiguity (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Fisher et al., 2008).

In recent years, there has been a dramatic shift in research towards a broader understanding of play as a continuum (Bergen, 1998; Broadhead, 2010; Wood, 2010). Many advocates of this approach view play as a spectrum, positioning free play at one end and teacher-led direct instruction at another, with guided play in the centre (Bergen, 1998; Miller & Almon, 2009; Wood, 2010). According to recent research, this is the optimal means of describing play, and signifies an important progression from previously restrictive and narrow definitions towards a more comprehensive understanding of play (Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2018). Viewing play as a spectrum encompasses these broad definitions under one all-encompassing approach and, in turn, provides much needed cohesion to the field, acknowledging the value of many types of play as opposed to seeking the single most rewarding method (Jensen et al., 2019). While many continua have been identified (Bergen, 1998; Broadhead, 2010; Wood, 2010; Zosh et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2019), the comprehensive framework designed by Zosh et al. (2017) has been selected for the purpose of this paper. This model ranges from free play, exclusively based on child autonomy, to the more balanced child-adult approaches of guided play and games (See Figure 1). Overall, this framework rejects a universal definition of play, and instead embraces its multifaceted nature and the flexibility that the field demands (Howard-Jones, Taylor & Sutton, 2002; Jenvey & Jenvey, 2002; Dyson, 2008).

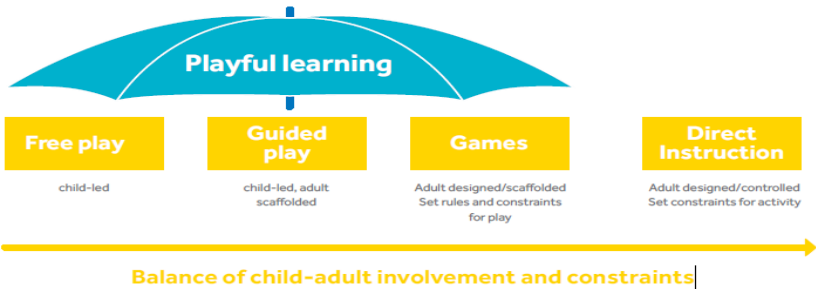


Figure 1. Spectrum of Playful Learning (Zosh et al., 2017)

### Role of Play in Early Childhood Social Development

Boucher (1999) describes play as the currency of early childhood, a naturally

accessible medium of expression through which children engage and interact. This paper will focus solely on the relationship between play and social development, which has been the focus of multiple theorists including Piaget (1962), Erikson (1950), and Vygotsky (1978). Researchers continue to highlight the positive association between play and numerous aspects of social development including: social interaction skills (Veiga et al., 2016; Liu, Yuen & Rao, 2017), social understanding (Stagnitti & Cooper, 2009), and development of theory of mind (Qu, Shen, Chee & Chen, 2015). In particular, examining the relationship between play and the development of peer acceptance and friendships is important for children on the AS, who often remain on the periphery of classroom social networks (Francke & Geist, 2003), given their inherent differences in social communication (APA, 2013) and play skills (Lam & Yeung, 2012; Memari et al., 2015).

Peer acceptance has been described as the degree of social popularity or acceptance by peers (Doll, 1996). This is an essential feature of social development (Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016), most often determined via peer nominations or ratings (Sebanc, Kearns, Hernandez & Galvin, 2007). Several research studies emphasise the relationship between play and peer acceptance, whereby play has been identified as the means in which social hierarchical order is organised within the classroom (Chang, Shih & Kasari, 2016). Ladd, Price, and Hart (1988) highlight the relationship between frequency of playground peer play and the degree of peer acceptance among twenty-eight pre-schoolers across three six-week intervals throughout a school year. Higher levels of co-operative and social play in the initial phases of the investigation predicted gains in peer acceptance. Such findings are supported by Flannery and Watson (1993), who identified a positive relationship between social pretend play and peer acceptance among sixty-six children, aged four to eight years, across various school contexts. However, such findings were based on self-reported measures, and thus require further replication in order to establish the role of play in contributing to social acceptance for children on the AS.

Levels of peer acceptance significantly impact the formation of friendships (Sebanc et al., 2007). Gray (2011, p.457) describes play as children's "natural means of making friends", a statement supported by several researchers in the early years (Bigelow, 1977; Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016). Coehlo, Torres, Fernandes, and Santos (2017) examined the relationship between social play interactions and reciprocal friendships among one hundred and twenty-eight pre-schoolers across six preschool classes. Results revealed that positive play interactions between peers were associated with an increased number of

reciprocal friendships. Scott and Panksepp (2003) also emphasise the positive relationship between rough and tumble play and friendships in their investigation of twenty peer dyads within laboratory sessions. However, this study lacks sufficient data to support such claims. Overall, this research literature highlights the role of play in offering a natural context to develop social relationships in early childhood.

## **Play Characteristics of Children on the Autism Spectrum**

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by difficulties in social and communication skills as well as restrictive and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This definition has evolved over the years, however, differences in social and communication remain a core feature of ASD. One such aspect of social and communication, documented since Kanner's (1943) seminal observations, involves the play characteristics of children on the AS. Many researchers have examined these qualities in relation to social play, whereby the play of children on the AS has been described as solitary (Jordan, 2013) and lacking in interactive qualities (Kasari, Freeman & Paparella, 2006; Memari et al., 2015). Much of this research has employed Parten's (1933) criteria to examine these characteristics of social play, positioning the play of children on the AS within the non-social stages of solitary or parallel play (Boutot, Guenther & Crozier, 2005).

Holmes and Willoughby (2005) conducted one of the few investigations of the social play of children on the AS within naturalistic school settings. They recorded the free play of seventeen children, aged four to six years, within early year's classrooms across five visits. Such observations revealed widespread parallel and solitary play behaviours among children on the AS. These results are supported by Anderson, Moore, Godfrey, and Fletcher-Flinn (2004) in their examination of the free play of ten children on the AS, ranging in ages from three to seven years, during authentic playground sessions. Children pursued activities that facilitated solitary play as opposed to socially interactive peer engagement. These investigations highlight the non-social and solitary play behaviours of children on the AS and lack of progression towards more social levels of play within Parten's (1932) framework.

Differences in play have also been identified based on cognitive dimensions, derived from Piaget's (1955) theory of play. One of the earliest instances of such differences is reflected in object-oriented play (Chang, Shih, Landa, Kaiser & Kasari, 2018). This is often conducted in a rigid and repetitive manner (Lifter, Mason & Barton, 2011) including behaviours such as "banging or shaking

objects to more complex acts such as stacking and lining up” (Wolfberg, 2009, p.46). These repetitive and ritualistic play actions are indicative of the inflexible and stereotypical nature of play of children on the AS (Boucher & Wolfberg, 2003), and have been associated with inherent behavioural characteristics of ASD, including stereotypical and repetitive movements and fascination with sensory qualities of objects, as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V, APA, 2013).

Furthermore, differences in pretend play have been identified as a core defining characteristic of ASD for many years (DSM-V, APA 2013; DSM-IV-TR, APA 2000, DSM-IV, APA, 1994). Much of this research has reported difficulties in symbolic play in relation to Leslie’s (1987) criteria. Lam and Yeung (2012) conducted one of the few investigations of differences in symbolic play between children on the AS and appropriately matched neuro-typical peers across all categories of Leslie’s (1987) criteria. Results reported significant differences in all levels of symbolic play in comparison to peers, suggesting that children on the AS exhibit significant difficulties in higher levels of pretend play. Such findings have been corroborated by Thiemann-Bourque, Johnson, and Brady (2019), and Libby, Powell, Messer, and Jordan (1998). In contrast, Charman and Baron-Cohen (1997) offer competing findings based on their examination of the symbolic play acts of children on the AS, in comparison to a group of appropriately matched peers with developmental disabilities. They found no differences in the symbolic play of children on the AS using measures of Leslie’s (1987) criteria. However, these findings were solely based on the investigation of object substitution acts and failed to examine higher order symbolic play which may account for such discrepancies. It is evident children on the AS experience differences across all aspects of play. However, the presence or degree of such differences may not be universal to all children on the AS, as originally proposed by Wolfberg et al. (2012), thus reflecting the diversity and heterogeneity of the AS.

## **Fostering a Culture of Play within Early Years Education for Children on the Autism Spectrum**

Play is a fundamental right of all children, as documented in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which we, as educators, are obliged to honour and uphold. This not only involves supporting children’s access to play, but also adapting play content based on their developmental level and individual interests (Carrero, Lewis, Zolkoski & Lusk, 2014; Papoudi & Kossyvaki, 2018; Peters & Swadener, 2018). This is a matter of utmost importance for children on the AS, whose play behaviours have been regarded

as “abnormal” (Jarrold, Boucher & Smith, 1993; p.295), “impoverished” (Riguet, Taylor, Benaroya & Klein, 1981; p.440), and “inappropriate” (Sigman & Ruskin, 1999; p.75). While the majority of traditional research emphasised the importance of ‘training’ children on the AS to play “more normally” (Boucher, 1999; p.2), Jordan (2003) highlights the need to acknowledge children’s differences in play. This involves remaining flexible and open in our perceptions of play as opposed to the insistence of play behaviours that reflect traditional conventions of play. Such an approach is emphasised in the general comment on Article 31 by the UNCRC (2013) which highlights the intrinsic value of play for all children, regardless of its type. As a result, it is essential that the play of children on the AS is valued as different, not less (Grandin, 2012).

Consequently, supporting the play of children on the AS requires extending beyond the play of children on the AS, and involves adopting a culture of inclusion and acceptance of difference within the classroom (Wolfberg, 2009; Theodorou & Nind, 2010). Peers therefore assume a pivotal role in promoting the play of children on the AS, something which is often underestimated in previous research (Yang, Wolfberg, Wu & Hwu, 2003). Focusing on such fundamental concepts proves essential, given the role of play in determining social status and inclusion within the classroom (Terpstra, Higgins & Pierce, 2002). In this way, play demonstrates significant potential to act as a vehicle for inclusion within the early years (Theodorou & Nind, 2010). This is of central importance, given increasing emphasis on the inclusion of pupils on the AS within mainstream classroom contexts (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) and the challenges that children on the AS continue to face (Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlain & Locke, 2010). These challenges will be further documented in the next section of this paper.

### **Unlocking the Potential of Play to Support the Development of Social Relationships for Children on the Autism Spectrum**

Gray (2011.p. 457) describes play as children’s “natural means of making friends”. However, given differences in both play and social interaction skills, it remains unclear as to whether play is an easily accessible medium for children on the AS through which they can develop friendships. Whether or not it is easily accessible, play may be a powerful tool to support the development of social relationships for children on the AS. This was recently examined by Freeman, Gulsrud, and Kasari (2015) in their longitudinal investigation of the relationship between symbolic play and friendship development among forty pre-schoolers on the AS. Significant positive correlations were reported between earlier

symbolic play skills at age three years and friendship quality five years later. However, such results were centred on parent and child reported measures based on qualities of helpfulness, security, closeness, and conflict, and thus, require further replication. Chang, Shih, and Kasari (2016) offer supporting findings for this research in their investigation of the role of play in influencing peer acceptance and friendships among thirty-one children on the AS within a mainstream preschool class. Based on observational data, the researchers reported twenty percent of children on the AS exhibited friendships with peers in school. Chang et al., (2016) noted these children demonstrated greater incidents of free play with peers, which may have resulted in the reported greater levels of reciprocal friendships.

This paper previously outlined the role of play in contributing to peer acceptance levels within early year's classrooms, a universal language that proves essential in the formation of classroom social hierarchies (Flannery & Watson, 1993; Ladd et al., 1988). This may prove fundamental for children on the AS, who often remain on the periphery of classroom social networks (Chamberlain, Kasari & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007) and experience isolation and rejection which can continue through to adulthood (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). Given the centrality of play in influencing peer acceptance levels, it is concerning that few investigations have examined the use of play as a valuable tool in supporting the development of peer acceptance. Santillan, Frederick, Gilmore, and Locke (2019) did, however, attempt to explore the relationship between children's playground peer engagement (including play) and peer acceptance levels among fifty-five children on the AS, aged five to twelve years. Peer acceptance was measured using peer nominations and ratings across forty-two mainstream classrooms and sixteen schools. Positive correlations were reported between peer acceptance and social engagement in playground interactions. However, play was one of several components of peer engagement measures, and so, it proves difficult to isolate such positive findings in relation to play. Such research contradicts findings reported by Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, and Rotheram-Fuller (2011), who found no correlation between classroom social status and playground engagement among sixty children on the AS, aged six to eleven years, across mainstream primary classrooms. However, this investigation was based on observations and interventions less than a week in duration which may account for such discrepancies in results.

Overall, few, if any studies, investigate the role of play as a suitable medium for increasing peer acceptance among children on the AS. Given the positive results obtained from the above investigations, it is evident play demonstrates

significant potential to support the development of social relationships for children on the AS but requires more investigation.

## **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

In Ireland, there has been a considerable move towards play-based pedagogies to support the play of children in early year's education (ECE). This paper highlights the need to extend this positive practice for children on the AS and emphasises the power of play in promoting access to social interaction opportunities, given its unique role in the formation of social hierarchies (Terpstra et al., 2002; Chang et al., 2016). This involves acknowledging the value of the play of children on the AS, despite differences outlined by Boucher (1999), and adopting a child-centred developmental approach in supporting their access to play (Carrero et al. 2014; Papoudi & Kossyvakis, 2018; Peters & Swadener, 2018). This not only entails supporting the play behaviours of children on the AS, but continuing to promote inclusion within the early year's classroom (Wolffberg, 2009). Fostering such an inclusive culture is a fundamental feature of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016), ensuring participation and support for all children within ECE. In this context, play demonstrates the potential to act as the central vehicle for inclusion, promoting a culture of acceptance and inclusion, and enabling all children to reach their full potential. This concept is further reiterated in UNCRC (2013), whereby play is described as a "universal design to promote inclusion" of children with additional needs.

This paper not only identifies practical implications for early childhood educational contexts, but also highlights significant implications within the research literature for new research agendas on play in ECE for children on the AS. Several researchers highlight the value of play in promoting the social development of children in the early years (Kossyvakis & Papoudi, 2016; Zosh et al., 2018). However, the role of play in supporting the social development of children on the AS remains largely unexplored within the literature. This is surprising given the central role of play within the early years (Whitebread et al., 2012). Overall, many questions remain unanswered within the literature in terms of how best to support children on the AS to access play within early years' education, and similarly, whether play can be used as an effective medium to support children on the AS to gain access to key social interaction experiences and friendships within early year's classrooms. Future studies are needed to investigate the empowering role of play in contributing to social interaction and development of pupils on the AS. This paper draws on the literature to



address this gap in ECE and inform future studies on how best to enhance play opportunities for young children on the AS in order to support social relationships and opportunities for learning and development.

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# A Reflection on Research Methods that Engage Young Children with Environmental Sustainability

Jane Spiteri

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the participatory research methods used in a study conducted in the field of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS), with young children (age 3–7 years) in Malta, which explored their perceptions of environmental sustainability and the influences upon these. Built on the belief that young children are active agents in their own lives, who hold perceptions worth exploring, this paper provides a critical reflection upon conversational interviews with children, photograph interpretation, children's drawings, children's interpretations of their drawings, the use of constructivist tools, and methodological and ethical challenges experienced during the research process.

## Introduction

In recent decades, conceptualisations of children and childhood changed the way research involving young children is conducted (Kellett, 2010). Moving towards a sociocultural perspective, research approaches in the field started embracing the use of visual and participatory research methods to explore young children's views (Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on some of the participatory research methods used to explore young children's (aged 3–7 years) perceptions of environmental sustainability and the influences upon these, in Malta. The global environmental crisis humanity is experiencing is essentially due to the use and (mis)management of natural resources by previous and current generations. A sustainable future cannot be achieved without considerable modification of lifestyles and a rethinking of the relationship between humans, all living species, and the natural environment. This calls for an understanding of human behaviour and its adverse impact on environmental protection and well-being.

It also calls for urgent actions by everyone to achieve environmental sustainability. In this paper, environmental sustainability is defined as an activity which calls for a balance between the natural, social, cultural, and economic capital of the planet, which will be utilised by current and future generations of living creatures. Young children are the future - they will inherit the planet and the current environmental problems. Should the current unsustainable practices persist, young children will pay the consequences for years to come. Thus, the current state of the environment calls for urgent action by adults and children. To do this, children need to be equipped with the skills to face these challenges in the future. They need to learn how to take an active role in mitigating some of the negative impacts of environmental degradation and work together towards a sustainable future. Evidence suggests that education is key to achieving a sustainable future (UN, 2015a), including early childhood education and care (ECEC). Researchers worldwide have noted the relevance of sustainability to ECEC, and have called upon the need to include young children in research related to sustainability issues (Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008; Davis, 2009). This paper is aimed at advancing the discussions around different methods to engage young children as active participants in the research process within the new and emerging field of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS). Specifically, it aims to present and examine three participatory data collection methods in a study exploring young children's (aged 3–7) perceptions of environmental sustainability: children's drawings, children's interpretations of their drawings, and photograph interpretation. Included in this discussion is the use of a constructivist tool (a puppet) to aid conversational interviews with young children.

## **Listening to Children**

Past research in environmental education (EE) was mostly dominated by a developmental perspective, in which children were seen as objects of research, rather than as active participants and valued contributors in research (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009; Barratt Hacking, Cutter-Mackenzie and Barratt, 2013). Three decades ago, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (United Nations [UN], 1989) afforded children worldwide the right to express their views on matters that affect their lives and called for respect for their views. Specifically, Article 12 of the UNCRC views children as capable of forming their own views and gives them a right to a voice in matters affecting them, thus giving them a right to a voice. Therefore, the act of listening gives young children agency and voice in research. Agency is how children express their voices (Pufall

and Unsworth, 2004). In this paper, agency acknowledges children's competence, right, and capacity to understand and act upon the world in which they live (Mayall, 2002; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). In the literature concerning rights-based perspectives, children's voices are defined as "views of children that are actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children's lives" (Brooks and Murray, 2016: 3). In this paper, voice refers to the ideas, hopes, intentions, and dreams which children guard as their own. Voice includes both verbal and non-verbal communication and recognises "the fact that children are much more self-determining actors than we generally think" (Pufall and Unsworth, 2004: 8). The act of listening to children and children's voices are still contested terms and indeed, listening is also problematic for several reasons. For example, children's voices are influenced by cultural boundaries of childhood because "Voice is a social construct operating in a cultural context where shared meaning is negotiated" (Kellett, 2010: 196). Given the lack of consensus concerning the definition and vocabulary for listening to children's perspectives (Brooks and Murray, 2016; Murray, 2019), there is confusion concerning research about children's perspectives, a situation which often results in children's voices being ignored or partially addressed (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Frequently, children's voices go unheard because of adults' belief that children lack competency and skills (Kellett, 2010; 2011), thus reflecting a hierarchy where children are considered less powerful than adults. This concept could have been propagated by the belief that the younger children are, the less they tend to be regarded as capable of forming opinions and expressing their views (Murray, 2016). Therefore, while many children want to make decisions (Morrow, 2008), the diverse nature of their participation and decision-making can confuse adults (Foley, 2011). Adult discourse around children's participation in research tends to focus on "adult-initiated processes" (Lansdown, 2010: 26). Adults' taxonomies of children's participation highlight different ways in which children are denied agency (Ackermann, Feeny and Newman, 2003). Disregard for children's voices subordinates young children (Levinas, 1980) and diminishes their experiences of autonomy and self-regulation, and could possibly reduce their motivation to learn (Murray, 2019).

Global organisations have become increasingly interested in early childhood development (UN, 2015b ;G20, 2018; OECD, 2018), making listening to children's voices an important issue (Clark, 2018). Thus, promoting contexts where children's status and their place in society are reconsidered, and where their worldviews and experiences have become prominent subjects of research in the field of early childhood (Dockett et al., 2017). The UNCRC and the new

sociology of childhood, with its efforts to reflect critically on dominant views of children and childhood, have influenced the re-conceptualisation of children and childhood. Consequently, researchers have begun to use more participatory methods, including visual research methods, when conducting research with young children (Dockett et al., 2017), and listening to children's voices became an integral element of participatory research methods in ECEC (Murray, 2019). Indeed, research over the past three decades has shifted towards conducting research with and by children, positioning children as interpreters of their own lives and experiences, rather than as informants of research (Barratt Hacking et al., 2013). The move away from research on children toward research with children and the changing perspectives of children have generated interest in participatory research methods (Dockett et al., 2017), which are child-centred, participatory and creative in the ways they elicit young children's views about an issue, including environmental sustainability. In seeking to understand young children's perspectives, researchers place emphasis on the strengths of children as contributing members of society who are experts on their own lives, and their competence as capable of holding and sharing their own views and opinions. Thus, childhood is viewed as a social construction influenced by culture, time, and context (James and Prout, 1997), and children's views deserve serious consideration in community decision-making (Lansdown, 2010; Murray, 2016; Lyndon, Bertram, Brown and Pascal, 2019). In this paper, I draw attention to listening to young children's voices as a way of understanding and acknowledging their needs and interests in environmental sustainability. By positively responding to children's voices, this research conveys to children, and others, that children's perspectives are valuable and meaningful and worthy of attention. Thus, instilling in children a sense of belonging as recognised citizens of a community.

## **Methodology**

Influenced by the UNCRC (UN, 1989), postmodern views of children and childhood, and the new sociology of childhood, this study is underpinned by an ontological perspective that acknowledges children's right to a voice in research. Additionally, to obtain a holistic understanding of the child, this study adopts two important perspectives which complement each other: a socio-cultural and a sociological perspective of the child. While it recognises the social nature of learning, it draws on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which states that all interactions are mediated and so each person's perceptions of the world are unique to their experiences. From a socio-cultural perspective,



the child is considered a developing human being (Vygotsky, 1978). From a sociological perspective, childhood is considered a social construct (Gray and Macblain, 2012), where children are viewed as social actors in their own lives, therefore worthy of sharing their views and opinions, and separate from adults (such as parents and caregivers) (James and Prout, 1997; Christensen and Prout, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011). Thus, this paper acknowledges children as competent and social beings, who have agency and can construct their own knowledge and understanding in collaboration with each other. As a result, an interpretive conceptual framework underpins this qualitative multiple case study research (Stake, 2006). The methodological stance adopted in this research influenced my choice of research methods. Participatory research methods, including conversational interviews with children, photograph interpretation, children's drawings, and their interpretations of them, are used to collect data in this study. Specifically, this paper focuses on the development of participatory research methods used during a larger study which was undertaken as part of my doctoral research aimed at exploring better ways of listening to children's perspectives on environmental sustainability, particularly the contexts of home and school.

## **Study Context**

The research took place in two early years' settings (state schools) and one household in Malta. Education in Malta is non-compulsory for children under five years of age, where a provision of nurseries and kindergarten centres are available, but it is compulsory for children aged five to 16 years (EURYDICE, 2019). While the Maltese curriculum framework recognises the unique child and seeks to be guided by children's interests (Ministry of Education and Employment [MEDE], 2012), there is a prevailing discourse of readiness and a political emphasis on the implementation of the direct teaching of mathematics and literacy skills in the early years' phase. Evidence of this has been provided by local research (Sollars, Attard, Borg and Craus, 2006) which demonstrates that children, as young as 2 and 3 years old, in early childhood contexts were given "homework" to satisfy parental demand for academic achievements later on in life. Therefore, this study, with its focus on giving children a voice in matters which are relevant to them, sits in contrast to the increasing focus on school readiness within the sector in Malta.

**Participants:** A group of 12 children (aged 3–7 years) participated in this research, together with ten teachers, five parents, and one head teacher. While adults' perceptions of environmental sustainability were studied alongside the

children's, adults' responses only served to highlight children's data and not take priority over them. The study was conducted over a period of 12 weeks.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Research with young children requires specific ethical considerations (European Early Childhood Education Research Association [EECERA], 2014; Lyndon et al., 2019; Murray, 2016). Engaging young children in research gives them voice and agency and promotes their participation. Since my study explored young children's perceptions of environmental sustainability, its methodology encouraged young children to collaborate actively in democratic research. Consent was gained across all settings and outlined anonymity, confidentiality of data, and participants' rights to withdraw. This stance was to be in keeping with participatory research methods used in the study and within the remit of giving children a voice in matters of interest and relevance to them. A data storage system (Stake, 1995) was used, which included number codes for tapes and transcripts, storage of my electronic data in a password-protected memory key, and PC with anti-viral protection and firewall. Additionally, this study was framed by a value orientation committed to environmental justice. Therefore, although ethical challenges presented in securing fair power relationships between all participants in the research, access, consent, and data collection, these were mitigated by the study's value orientation and were shaped by the principles of qualitative multiple case study research and the research methods used. Reflexivity with participants was supported via collaborative constructions and interpretations of data.

The role of the researcher is central in conducting qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, the researcher-child relationship is a relationship of power (MacNaughton, 2005); agency and context influence interactions (Dockett et al., 2017). Essentially, the relationship between myself, the participants, and the research methods used shaped the interpretive methodology adopted in this research process. The success of an interview often depends on the researcher's ability to develop:

a trusting personal relationship between the researcher and the interviewee that encourages open, honest, and detailed replies,...  
In building an open and trusting relationship, researcher and interviewee work toward forming... a conversational partnership"  
(Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 6 – 7).

For this reason, in this study, a conversational partnership was built on respect and trust between children and I, where I valued each child's contribution and viewed it as reliable information. However, I was aware that this partnership was not a balanced relationship because I was in control of the progress of the interview session even if children somehow helped to shape the process of the interview by exerting power, for example, by withholding information.

Thus, the major ethical principles which guided my interactions with the children was that the children's welfare was a priority over the research. This did not remove the adult-child power relationship in research because it can never be neither eliminated (Gallagher, 2009) nor ignored (Mayall, 2008). However, in this research I took the least adult role (Mandell, 1991). I tried to empower children by using child-friendly research methods and consider children as the experts in their own lives. The context of the research, particularly the school, influenced the child-researcher interactions, in the sense that in such context the adult (the researcher) had a right to ask questions that children answered (Dockett et al., 2017). This draws attention to the need to pay attention to how meanings are constructed in different contexts. Data generated in this study proved to be challenging because while confidentiality was ensured, anonymity was not. The complexity of this decision was influenced by the context in which this study was carried out, where the participants and I lived on a small island, which made the identification of participants a lot easier, given the tight-knit communities in Malta. To this end, confidential information about individual participants was never shared to maintain sensitivity, and pseudonyms were used by participants.

## **Discussion of Methods and Strategies**

Over the years, diverse qualitative research methods have been used to seek young children's perspectives (Clark and Moss, 2011; Veale, 2011), even in ECEfS (Engdahl and Rabušicová, 2010; Kahriman-Ozturk, Olgan and Tuncer, 2012). Yet, these provide very little understanding of how young children make sense of the concept of environmental sustainability in different contexts, making this study significant because it sheds light on the ways researchers can explore children's perceptions in the contexts of home and school. Since this paper is about child-centred research methods, it focuses on conversational interviews conducted with children using photograph interpretations, and children's drawings, and their interpretations of them.

To collect rich data for this study, the data collection process proceeded as follows. First, I conducted conversational interviews with the children to explore their understanding of environmental sustainability. Then, I asked them to

draw their ideas of the issue. This was followed by conversational interviews with the children about their drawings. The next step was showing the children photographs (see Fig. 9 – 15) of certain environmental issues and I asked them to discuss these. Notably, the drawing activity was conducted before the photograph interpretation activity as I did not want to influence children's ideas with any of the ideas portrayed in the photographs chosen for this study.

## The Puppet

Initially, I thought that generating data about the abstract concept of environmental sustainability can be difficult for some children to understand. Indeed, challenges of generating data with young children are mostly created by a gap between the social worlds of the researcher and that of the child (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Often, in research with young children, persona dolls or life-sized dolls as tall as a 3- to 4-year-old child, are used to introduce difficult and controversial topics to young children in early childhood settings (Brown, 2001), for example, to raise awareness of discriminatory behaviours amongst children and adults. Usually the personality of the persona doll is developed by the researcher and the researcher acts as both a voice and an interpreter (Brown, 2001). Since this study was not aimed at raising any awareness about an issue, but rather to encourage children to talk about environmental sustainability, a difficult concept for children to discuss, a hand-held puppet (called Ġanni) was used instead (see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1 Ġanni, the puppet**

The personality of the puppet was developed by the researcher (myself). I acted as both his voice and interpreter. Ġanni was introduced to the children as:

Ġanni is a 5-year-old puppet from a small village in Comino (a small island, part of the Maltese archipelago). He is my assistant and he has come down to this school/home to meet you and to help me. He has a baby brother at home. Ġanni likes toys and

his favourite toy is a bike and he also likes to read and to play outside.

Initially, Ġanni was placed in a corner of the classroom where children usually played. Although the children knew that Ġanni was not real, they were very surprised and excited to meet him, play with him, and learn more about him. As a constructivist tool, Ġanni served as a creative data collection technique which drew on children's imagination and aided conversations with the children. It encouraged a deeper level of engagement and conversations between the children and myself that was fun and enjoyable for children. For example, S (girl, aged 3 year), told me:

May I speak to Ġanni today?, I will speak to you later.

F (boy, aged 7 years) explained that:

I enjoyed talking to Ġanni. He is fun to talk to. I wish you could let him stay so that we play together sometimes.

Overall, the children enjoyed the element of make-belief created by the puppet. Only one boy, L (aged 7 years), was not interested in the puppet and refused to allow Ġanni to be present during his interview because he believed that puppets were for children and he was not a child anymore.

## **Conversational Interviews**

Observations were carried out in school and at home, but they did not generate enough data to arrive at a holistic understanding of the issue under study. Consequently, individual conversational interviews with the children provided data which could not be observed (Stake, 1995). Each interview was an inter-subjective process between the children and myself (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), and provided me with a lot of in-depth data about children's perceptions of environmental sustainability and the influences upon these ideas. For example, J (girl, aged 3 years) described the environment as including natural elements like,

A tree and the sea.

J described environmental sustainability as a way of people taking care of the environment, which is a source of nutrition for people and stated:

Because I have trees at home and we take care of them ... Because they make grapes and we take grapes in a bag and we eat them when we go to the beach.

D (boy, aged 4 years) expressed his concerns with air pollution as environmental

sustainability issue which needs to be taken care of. He said,

Smoke and exhaust make the place dirty. That is not good. Smoke is not good for us.

Later, he explained that

Mums and dads should take care of everything.

Y (girl, aged 6 years) described environment sustainability as nature which needs to be taken care of,

Y: The environment for me is the trees, plants, the sea, and like that and the people can enjoy nature and it helps people live.

Puppet: How does the environment help people live?

Y: The trees and the sea give us food... (pause) and we need to take care of them to live well.

Most children's interviews were conducted at school, except for the interview with one boy, which was conducted at his family home. This choice was based on the premise that interviews with children need to be conducted in a place that they were used to and felt comfortable in. Consequently, prior to conducting interviews I asked children where they wished to be interviewed and I consented to their wishes.

## **Drawings**

Art is closely related to children's thinking (Vygotsky, 1971), especially if they lack the linguistic capacity to adequately present their understandings of a complex issue such as environmental sustainability. Children's drawings have been widely used in research tools with young children to offer insight into the representation of children's worldviews (Clark and Moss 2011; Veale, 2011), even by environmental researchers (Barraza and Robottom, 2008; Sorin and Gordon, 2013). In this study, each child was invited to draw something related to environmental sustainability, using a blank A4 sheet of white paper and crayons, which I provided. Children were free to stop drawing whenever they wanted. Asking the children to draw provided almost no guidance for them and they were free to express themselves in their illustrations, thus providing a snapshot of their mental image of a concept in an unguided manner.

## **Interpretations of Drawings**

Drawings provide visual data but they may not be enough to communicate the

full meaning that children have of a concept (Veale, 2011). Having explored a variety of drawing methods (e.g. Anning and Ring, 2004), I decided to let the children produce their own drawings and then they were given the opportunity to interpret their own drawings as well. For this reason, storytelling by children about their own drawings was used in this research to inform and enrich data by providing a holistic interpretation of the young children's ideas. Verbal recording of children's interpretations of their drawings provided useful data for interpretation of their perceptions of environmental sustainability. Stories about their drawings offered tools for them to organise and explain their complex and abstract issues (Anning and Ring, 2004), which would otherwise be difficult to explain in words alone. By asking children to tell the story of their drawing (see Fig. 2–8), I did not impose my adult interpretation of their drawings, which could have been far removed from children's worldviews. As indicated in figures 2–8, the children's descriptions of the environment and environmental sustainability provided insight into their geographical, social, cultural, and familial influences of their perceptions of the issue under study.



**Fig. 2 T's (girl, aged 4 years) drawing of the environment as nature, which she described as,**

There is the sun, the trees, the animals and the worms.



**Fig. 3 A's (girl, aged 5 years) drawing of nature and environmental**

**sustainability, which she described as,**

“This is the environment with the sun, the grass and a flower. They are good for us.”

Figures 4 – 6 were provided by F (boy, aged 7 years) in his attempt to illustrate his ideas about the environment, environmental sustainability and what influenced his ideas about the issue.



**Fig. 4 F's (boy, aged 7 years) drawing of the ideal environment.**



**Fig. 5 F's (boy, aged 7 years) drawing of the current state of the environment.**





**Fig. 6 F's (boy, aged 7 years) drawing of air pollution caused by power stations and how it impacts people's health.**

As research methods, children's drawings and storytelling about their drawings were successfully developed and were found to be good approaches to elicit information about environmental sustainability from young children. These research methods were enjoyed by all children except L (boy, aged 6 years). It turned out that L was unable to draw and therefore he considered drawing to be a childish (albeit naive) activity. Two girls (Y and JL) did not want to colour their drawings (see Fig. 7–8).



**Fig. 7 Y's (girl, aged 6 years) drawing of the environment and environmental sustainability.**



**Fig. 8 JL's (girl, aged 6 years) drawing of people taking care of the environment by recycling waste.**

Overall, children's participation in this activity was influenced by their lived experiences and their conception of environmental sustainability. Children's drawings were scanned by me and returned to the children immediately.

## Photographs

Photographs, including those taken by children, have been used as useful research tools with young children to support participatory elements and children's engagement in research, and assist the researcher to gain better understanding of children's perspectives (Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry, 2011; Dockett et al., 2017). Permission for me to ask children to take their own photographs was refused by heads of schools and therefore, I prepared seven photographs depicting various environmental issues (Fig. 9 – 15). In doing so, I was aware that I was introducing my own influences on the children's perceptions of environmental sustainability by presenting the issue under study from my point of view. This might have positioned me as a controller of the children's space and time, therefore reinforcing my role as a researcher. To minimise my influence on the children's responses, I opted for photographs portraying a variety of local and global environmental sustainability issues.



**Fig. 9 – 15 Photographs of environmental issues used during conversational interviews with children**

Inspired by the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) and the UNCRC (UN, 1989), and through discussion with educators and children, these photographs were introduced to children during conversational interviews between the children and myself. Photograph interpretation sessions were conducted with each child individually. Each session consisted of showing each child the photographs of different sustainability issues and children talked about them. The children enjoyed the photos and associated them with their lived experience in Malta. They were able to recall the pictures they had seen and were keen to participate in a discussion based on these photographs. All children chose to participate in the discussion of photographs.

## Critical Analysis

With democracy at its core, child-centred and participatory research methods are effective communication tools to assist children in expressing their world views, while asserting their right to a voice about important aspects of their lives (Clark and Moss, 2011; Barratt Hacking et al., 2013; Sorin and Gordon, 2013). This raises arguments about the competence of young children to discuss

complex issues, such as environmental sustainability, and the value of these perspectives. Therefore, these merit some consideration. This section provides a critical reflection on how the research methods discussed above contributed to my understanding of the children's voices about environmental sustainability.

Overall, these participatory research methods adopted in this study served as communicative tools, mostly by eliminating language barriers. They assisted children in articulating some complex thoughts about a complex issue (environmental sustainability), which would have been difficult to articulate using linguistic methods alone (Clark and Moss, 2011). At the very least, these methods demonstrate that children took ownership of these activities; their participation was invited rather than required and all were keen to participate. While the puppet in this study served as a useful constructive tool, one boy (L) found the idea of using the puppet and drawing a picture to be very naive. Rather than assuming that such method is necessarily limiting, it is important to look to the context in which this study was carried out. L was an articulate boy and the rationale for not using the puppet with him was that he felt that I was treating him like a "child" by using the puppet, which he said he did not like. However, this reaction was not directed towards me personally. It may be that L's confidence in his own abilities to talk to the puppet has been undermined to the point that he was unwilling to engage in the activity.

Children's drawings are often promoted as child-centred, interesting, and meaningful ways to engage young children as active participants in the research process. Indeed, evidence suggests that children's drawings can offer insight into the representation of children's worldviews (Vygotsky, 1971; Clark and Moss, 2011). Similar findings have been supported even in environmental research (Barraza and Robottom, 2008; Sorin and Gordon, 2013), particularly if children lack the verbal capacity to adequately present their ideas during interviews. When I asked the children to draw, I did not provide any guidance for them and they were free to express ideas in their illustrations. This helped children provide a snapshot of their mental image of environmental sustainability in an unguided manner.

In this study, children's stories about their own drawings were intended to encourage them to share information about what is important for them in a way that is fun and meaningful to them. Stated differently, children's drawings are considered to be empowering for young children, as they afford young children some control over the research process. In this regard, children in this study had control over what they drew and the meaning they attributed to their drawings

through the storytelling about their drawings. Consequently, children directed this study towards a more nuanced understanding of what may seem to be unremarkable children's drawings.

Although children's drawings provided sympathetic and respectful opportunities for the children to represent themselves without adult support, they had some limitations. For example, drawing as a data collection method was particularly appealing and engaging to most, but not all, children. For example, two girls did not want to colour their drawings. Moreover, some children had not yet developed their drawing skills and it took them a long time to finish their drawings. Possibly, the children could have been confused about whether it was their drawing skills or the issue under study which were being explored. Indeed, the children's drawings and their interpretations indicate that these are often constrained by the equipment to which they have access, guidelines provided, the children's worldview, and are influenced by their social and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, drawings alone may not communicate the children's full meaning of a concept and very often children like to draw pictures and tell a story about their drawings too. In fact, free drawing provided visual data, however, it was the verbal recording of children's stories of their drawings that provided the data for interpretation (Veale, 2011). The children's stories about their drawings offered tools for them to organise and explain their complex ideas about the issue under study (Anning & Ring, 2004), which would otherwise be difficult to explain only in words. In fact, conversations with children established that each drawing was the result both of careful deliberation of the issue discussed and the presence of myself as the researcher, and both contributed to the discussion of the drawings produced by the children. Indeed, children's storytelling about their drawings was an effective interview technique which provided rich data and a holistic interpretation of the children's understandings, without providing my adult interpretation of children's drawings.

In participatory research with young children, photographs are useful tools which assist researchers to explore young children's perspectives, while supporting children's engagement in research (Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett et al., 2017). Attention to visual methodology as a means of meaning-making is paramount when employing photograph interpretation in research with young children and highlights the complexity of the method. In line with the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, in this study, I used seven ready-made photographs to research young children's perceptions of environmental sustainability. The photographs were presented as fixed images representing local and global

environmental issue and were not considered as data but rather as illustrations aimed at gathering data with children. This, in turn, raises questions about the role of the photographs used. For example, are the photographs a representation of 'reality,' and, if so, whose 'reality' is it? Essentially, the original intention attributed to these photographs can only be understood by talking to the photographer.

I acknowledge that children's responses to the photographs used in this study might have been influenced by my choice of pictures of environmental sustainability issues which concerned me the most and by their life experience that led to certain interpretations, and not others. Perhaps, in doing so, I moved away from the constructivist perspective toward an almost positivist perspective, where I almost tried to "measure" children's knowledge of the issue under study, rather than explore it. In hindsight, looking at photographs as a research method from a constructivist perspective, I realise that these photographs represented one social milieu and just one subjective perspective of reality: the photographer's, while ignoring or possibly undermining others. The context of photographs could also have been the result of a political process where certain aspects have been highlighted while others were not for political reasons. Consequently, photographs represented a negotiation process between what was photographed and what was not. Furthermore, some children experienced language barriers particularly when they lacked the vocabulary to describe a photograph.

Clearly, the narrative component which resulted from the photograph interpretations in research with young children cannot be discounted. Children's data indicate that the photographs might have captured some element of reality, at least within the children's local context. Epistemologically speaking, the difference between the images and meanings rested in the way the children interpreted the photographs. Upon reflection, I suggest that perhaps adopting a more naturalistic, qualitative approach, and using methodologies that allow children to freely follow their train of thoughts (such as children taking their own photographs), could have produced different data and different results. This is not an easy task, especially in studies involving very young children, but it could enrich data in unexpected ways, even if this method is time-consuming, expensive, more demanding than traditional interviews, and entails different ethical, methodological and practical challenges. Essentially, I argue for the potential of using visual methods when conducting research with young children.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, data from this study suggest that children formed and expressed their views in different ways, often by drawing on personal experiences, and their funds of knowledge and cultural capital. In children's responses, social experiences were most influential in their descriptions of environmental sustainability, often using their immediate surroundings to gauge response to their drawings and/or photograph interpretations. Adopting a reflexive stance in this research to examine the benefits and limitations of the research methods employed helped me learn much about listening to children's perspectives of environmental sustainability through their drawings and interpretations. Reflection and critical analysis of participatory research methods used in ECEfS research are important for taking into consideration young children's interests, ideas, culture, and context to offer the best approach to improve the field further. In retrospect, perhaps the research would have benefited from letting children choose a research method they deem necessary for the issue under study, thus minimising (but not eliminating) the issue of power in research concerning children's lives.

Listening attends to children's perspectives and conveys the message that children's perspectives are important. However, conducting research with young children is not an easy task. Neither is it one which should be taken lightly. Research conducted with young children requires researchers to take time and care to understand young children's agentic engagements about issues which matter to them and not train young children to follow an adult research agenda (Murray, 2019). Additionally, listening to children helps adults get to know and understand children's needs and interests and respond positively to them, if they choose to do so, offering opportunities to improve child development and provide children with meaningful learning opportunities. Finally, listening to children is a process which requires constant adjustment of research methods and awareness of all verbal and non-verbal communication between children and researcher.

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# Choosing Relationships in Times of Challenge & Change: Exploring the Experiences of Families of Young Children on the Autism Spectrum as they Navigate the Irish Early Years' Education System Together

**Sarah O' Leary & Mary Moloney**

## **Abstract**

This paper draws upon a doctoral study and encompasses three main components: (1) changes to national policy on inclusive education in recent years, (2) research recommendations regarding inclusive practice, and (3) the primary author's lived experience of navigating the education system for her young child on the autism spectrum. It is concerned with the lived experiences of six parents of young children (aged from three to six years) on the autism spectrum as they navigate the Irish Early Years' Education system from pre-school to primary school. Recent policy changes not only impact the choices that families and educators make in relation to inclusive education, but also demand the development of positive relationships between all stakeholders involved. However, these families' experiences suggest the presence of conflicting and contradictory narratives at macro-policy level that impede the development of such relationships, resulting in the emergence of a significant gap between inclusive policy and practice. These contradictions have been created and responded to through the choices, roles, and actions of social actors within different social systems, including families, educators, and the Government.

## **Introduction**

Recognition of the human rights of individuals with additional needs in Ireland has been a recurring topic within the social justice discourse for the past number

of years. Consequently, there has been an emerging shift towards integrating children with special educational needs into mainstream education settings. National policy relating to children with additional needs has long emphasised the benefits of integration (DES, 2004; National Disability Authority, 2011), with enhanced outcomes for children on the autism spectrum in inclusive early childhood settings reiterated throughout the literature (Allen and Cowdery, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Moloney and McCarthy, 2018; Mozolic-Staunton et al., 2017). The need to create a culture of inclusion dominates ECCE discourse, and is core to the Access and Inclusion Model (DCYA, 2016) which stresses the integral role that educators have in making inclusion a reality for children with additional needs. To this end, as part of the AIM, The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years programme (LINC), a Special Purpose Level 6 Award, has been designed primarily to develop the knowledge, understanding, and skills of participants to empower them to support inclusion in early years settings, and adopt a leadership role that also enables them to support and supervise other staff in the setting to design, implement, and evaluate inclusive practice (MIC/ECI/MU, 2017).

Likewise, the role of individual teachers is widely referenced as being central to the realisation of inclusive education in schools in Ireland (NCSE, 2011, Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw, 2015; DES, 2017; 2018; 2019). It follows that inclusive practice relies on educators at all levels within the education system having positive views of inclusion, while also showing knowledge, understanding, and leadership in action (Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). However, in spite of the child-centred ideology espoused in education policy across the ECCE and primary school sectors, research into families' experiences as they help their child on the autism spectrum navigate their pre-school and primary school settings emphasises the stresses and challenges involved in this process, while also reiterating the critical role that educators can play in building bridges between the child's micro-level setting in early childhood and primary school (Denkyirah and Agbeke, 2010; Quintero and McIntyre, 2011; Lilley, 2014; Starr et al., 2016; Connolly and Gersch, 2016; Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). Many researchers suggest that families who adopt a strengths-based approach in the face of adversities that they endure as they navigate the world for and with their child on the autism spectrum experience more positive outcomes (e.g., Sirota, 2010; Holder, 2013; Woodman et al., 2015; Potter, 2016).

Crucially, educators must be aware of their role in strengthening families as they navigate their way through the education system for their young children on the autism spectrum (Fontil, Quintero and McIntyre, 2010; Lilley, 2014; Petrakos,

2015; Connolly and Gersch, 2016; Starr et al., 2016). However, educators must also recognise the many conflicting factors that permeate both theirs and parents' positioning in relation to children on the autism spectrum. This paper, which is based upon six parents' experiences of navigating the Irish early years' education system (both pre-school and primary school) for their child on the autism spectrum, provides insight into these imbalanced power relations. It points to the challenges and changes that parents experience as a direct result of neoliberal ideologies espoused at a macro-government level in Ireland, which limits the choices available to them regarding their child's education.

Since the economic recession (2008-2018), successive Irish governments have embraced a neoliberal ideology, promoting the development of the productive and competitive citizen across education and social policy (Lynch, Grummell and Devine 2012; Moloney, Rothe et al, 2019). However, such neoliberal ideology inevitably leads to inequalities at multiple levels (social, economic, political), where the more powerful and privileged identify the needs of the less powerful in terms of the requirements of wider society, and distribute provisions accordingly (Harvey, 2005; Kinsella, 2009; Mladenov, 2015). Within this context, the ultimate goal of inclusive policy and practice is reduced to preparing the future workforce. In Ireland, neoliberal ideology is evidenced within educational policy, and in particular, inclusion policy. Accordingly, inclusion has been redefined to combine conflicting socially just and economic ideals that are presented as the provision of equal opportunities for all Irish people to become productive and competitive citizens (DCYA, 2014; NCC, 2016). While recent policies on inclusive education within the primary sector, including the Revised Special Education Allocation Model/Circular 0013/2017 (DES, 2017) and the Comprehensive Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants (NCSE, 2018), espouse the importance of ensuring social justice for all children, they are simultaneously concerned with increasing the economic efficiency of the education system. Consequently, the needs of all children across the continuum of special educational needs are now met through a general allocation of supports (DES, 2017).

The study, on which this paper is based, draws upon an ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which emphasises the interacting systems present in each child's social construction of their world. Within this theory, the child's development is greatly influenced by interactions within the micro-system comprising their home and later, their educational setting. The relationships that result from the child's participation in different microsystems constitute the mesosystem, and include, for example, the interactions between

a child's home and preschool or school. As such, ecological theory is central to understanding and evaluating the lived experiences of young children on the autism spectrum and their parents. In order to identify the macro forces that influence these micro-settings, a policy analysis was undertaken to explore the dominant narratives within Irish education policy on inclusive education. This revealed the many potentially conflicting narratives, identified as (1) Care V Education, (2) Quality V Equality, and (3) Needs V Rights. Against the backdrop of her own lived experience with her young son, the primary author believes that navigating the education system is entirely relational, comprising of, and relying upon a variety of contexts and relationships. The present study developed from that place, and is complemented, and bolstered by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979; 2005). A reflective journal entry (11/02/17) notes that while the primary author's son is positioned at the centre of her relational matrix, her micro-experience as his parent "cannot be removed from my experience as an educator who in my practice has to ensure that the children on the spectrum within my care are included authentically". This relational positioning evolved into an immersed researcher role that proved integral to the exploration of the microsystems of young children on the autism spectrum. It also facilitated the inclusion of the mesosystem as an interpretive lens, where interactions between the children's microsystems, for example, home and school, could be understood. Adopting the role of researcher allowed these daily lived experiences to be located philosophically and critically, thus revealing the ideologies that inform the dominant narratives within the micro and mesosystems that impact the lives of children and their families.

The research is underpinned by critical narrative inquiry, whereby the importance of narrative (families' experiences) and grand narratives (wider social issues) permeate the methodology and associated methodological tools (Hickson, 2016; Kim, 2016). A central aim of the study is therefore concerned with the critical re-storying of parents' lived experiences of navigating the Irish Early Years' Education system for their child on the autism spectrum. Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling. All were parents/guardians of young children (aged three to six years) on the autism spectrum who were, or would be, attending pre-school settings in phase one (May-July, 2018), and transitioning to primary school following phase two of data collection (May-July, 2019).

Six parents agreed to participate in multiple interviews over the course of the study. Of the six participating parents, three engaged in an existing parent network of which the primary author, is herself, a member. Having

seen information relating to the study online through autism community networks, the three remaining parents approached the researcher voicing their interest in becoming involved. Five parents had more than one child on the autism spectrum. Therefore, the six parent narratives indirectly represent the experiences of nine children between three and six years old. Throughout the study, parents were enabled to talk extensively about their lived experiences of navigating the educational continuum from pre-school to the infant classes in primary school, for their young child/children on the autism spectrum.

Informed consent was integral to this study and ensured that participants could make an informed and voluntary decision about participation. By use of an information letter, participants were advised of the nature and objectives of the study, what their participation would involve, the researcher's identity, how the findings would be used (i.e., publications, presentations and doctoral thesis), and how their anonymity and the confidentiality of information provided would be assured. Because informed consent requires ongoing negotiation of the terms of agreement as the study progresses (Bryman, 2008; Fisher and Anushko, 2008), participants were asked and gave full commitment to this continuous, co-operative process. In order to protect participant's rights, well-being, safety, anonymity and confidentiality, codes were used instead of any identifiable details on data transcripts etc. and every effort was made to ensure that the 'restructuring' of participant stories did not breach confidentiality or anonymity agreements (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2009). Due to the primary author's unique positioning and prior association with some of the participants, the role of the second author was pivotal to increasing the trustworthiness of the research. The second author's role in interrogating the data, hypothesising, de-constructing, and re-constructing the narratives, enhanced the rigour of the research and credibility of the findings. Rather than reducing or eradicating issues surrounding subjectivity, this systematic approach to understanding the narratives increased the trustworthiness of the findings (Amankwaa, 2016; Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; Stewart et al., 2017) by embracing the relationship between subjectivity and trustworthiness.

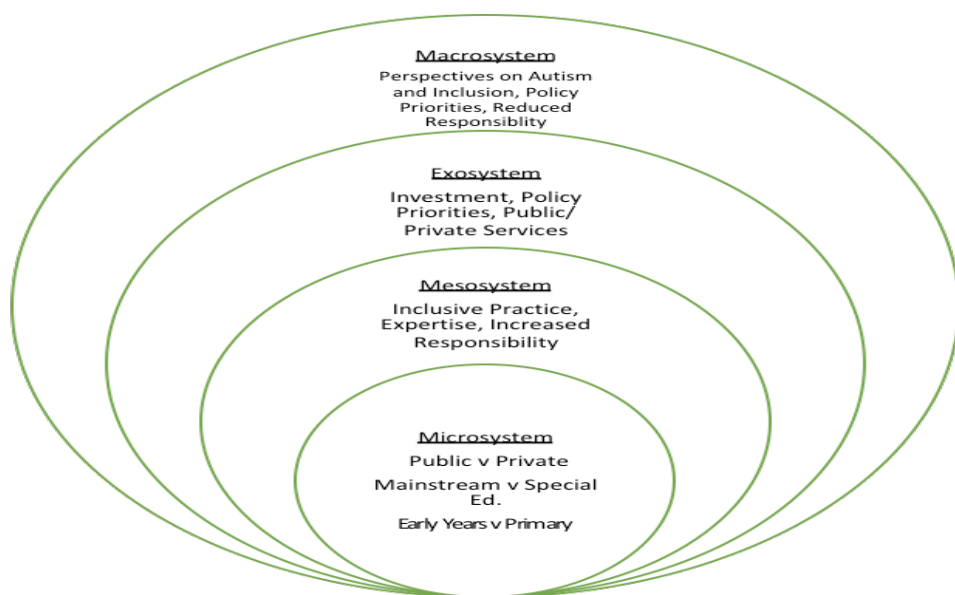
From the outset, it was considered that access to young children's voices and experiences would be realised through engagement with the narratives of the most significant people in their lives; their parents. The application of an I-Thou and I-It framework of analysis allowed each of the child-centred narratives to be understood in terms of the influences of important interactions and relationships on their lives. The first interpretation of the lived experience is defined as an 'I and It' relationship between the individual and its immediate experience or

subjective experience of a phenomenon, for example, a family's experience of autism. The second way in which existence is interpreted is through the more comprehensive 'I and Thou' association which focuses upon the wider world of relational contexts, and the connections between the 'I' and 'Thou' in every living relationship (Buber, 1970; Noddings, 1984; 1991 ). As parents provided the main accounts of both their child's and their own experience, the term I typically referred to their immediate personal experience, whereas the use of pronouns: he, she, and sometimes, them was typically used to denote particular reference to their child. Nonetheless, the I-Thou analytic tool was applied to all such references, ensuring the placement of the child at the centre of the narratives collected. The child on the autism spectrum therefore became the I within a complex, interconnected system of I-Thou and I-It interactions and relationships.

Findings suggest that changes to national policy regarding the inclusion of children with additional needs has deeply impacted the educational experiences of young children on the autism spectrum. This has resulted in significant changes in the choices available to their families. Parents were acutely aware that their child's inclusion in education relies not only on the availability of supports, but also on the level of understanding of autism within a particular preschool or school. In some instances, this has resulted in an absence of parental choice. In spite of such challenges, participating families still spoke about the positive aspects of their experiences. The importance of developing positive relationships: the significance of interactions, relationships, and values emerged the most dominant narrative. Parents also discussed negative relationships that lacked respect, understanding, and trust which they attributed primarily to relationships with professionals. The focus upon relationships across the interviews was underpinned throughout by the choices, roles, and actions of social actors within these relationships. An in-depth deconstruction and ecological reconstruction of the narratives was carried out to highlight the impact of relationships on families' experiences. The findings reported here focus upon the narrative of choice within the wider narrative of equality in education, and comprises three elements: choices made by family, choices made by educators, and choices made by government. Using an ecological framework, these choices are located within the micro, meso, exo, and macrosystem of these young children on the autism spectrum (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. An Ecological Overview of Choices Regarding Education**



Undeniably, parents of young children on the autism spectrum are faced with a multitude of choices that other families do not typically experience. The most common choices made by the families in this study were between public and private services, mainstream and special education, and finally, early years and primary education.

A dominant theme across parent narratives was the contrasting roles adopted by the public and private sector regarding service provision. On the surface, it appears that each participating parent chose to pay privately for either their children's diagnosis or subsequent therapies and interventions. Deeper analysis problematises this point, querying whether the element of choice was actually present in their decision to pay privately for services. Alice articulates how she did not 'get any services from EIC'. She suggests that this is 'because they know people will go private rather than wait. ...We don't hear from them. We hear nothing'. When faced with the absence of services or with silence, parental choice is removed. Findings indicate that replacing public services with private alternatives directly and adversely affects the development of relationships within the child's micro, meso, and exosystem. Long waiting lists and reduced access to therapy sessions mean that multidisciplinary teams within the public sector cannot develop adequate relationships with either children or parents. Michael's narrative highlights a contrast between the Department of Health and the Department of Education's capacity to build relationships with families:

They [HSE] let the private sector take it on and let us pay for it. It's the easiest way of dealing with the problem. Like it's different with schools and that I suppose because there isn't a private option, so it just is what it is. They have no choice but to deal with you...

However, a dominant grand narrative underlying the parents' child-centred stories was their access to education and typically, the many barriers encountered. When access issues arose for their children, families were generally faced with two binary choices: (1) mainstream or special education and (2) early years or primary education. In fact, parent narratives were saturated with references to the 'best place' for their young children. Brenda illustrates how having the freedom to choose the best place for a child can be taken away from parents by professionals, who have the power to make the ultimate choice and decision. In her opinion, a diagnosis meant that 'all of a sudden the unit is seen as the best place for you'. Alice reinforces this point, stating 'if they offer you a place in the unit and you refuse it you get nothing... They decide where the best place is'.

The division between mainstream and special education, and the suitability of either for their child, emerged as a recurring theme. From the outset, in the months prior to enrolment in pre-school, parents voiced their concerns for their child in relation to the pressures associated with attending mainstream school and apprehension about whether their child would be deemed suitable. While the benefits of inclusion that are cited in policy were discussed, some parents questioned whether these aspirations were realistic in practice, given recent cuts to special education and the nature of primary education in Ireland. Brenda emphasises this point with regards her son's denial of access to a special needs assistant (SNA) in mainstream education and her consequent decision regarding the 'best place' for him:

Technically, he doesn't even really need to be in a unit, because he's fine but then he can't go to mainstream without an SNA because it's so busy workwise and crowded in there. This is what I'm up against... They have you backed into a corner...

In other instances, parents described specialised settings as a 'better fit' for their children because they would have the opportunity to 'be themselves' [Hannah]. Prior to making her final decision regarding enrolment in primary school, Hannah asked the Early Intervention Team to observe her son and daughter within their ECCE setting, and make recommendations for their future placement. Following this, Hannah chose a specialised educational setting for them:

...they both said to me afterwards...that they would benefit more from the specialised setting. They gave examples like, for circle time or story time or whatever, they didn't like staying still, yes, they were quite happy and they weren't causing any trouble but they [her children] had their backs turned...

However, three families emphasised the entirely positive impact that professionals had on the choices they made regarding their children's education. In all instances, these professionals were early childhood educators.

Not only did the aforementioned parents choose their child's pre-school based on the individual qualities and capacity of the ECEC setting manager, they also chose, where possible, to avail of the second ECCE year, sometimes applying for an over age exemption to do so. Parents who opted to do this cited school readiness as a deciding factor, and expressed a desire for their child to stay where they were known, understood, and included. Michael's narrative incorporates the central importance of Jane, the preschool manager, in their lives, while also revealing the impact that the concept of school readiness has on their decision-making:

We would have been lost without Jane's...I mean completely lost. We are just so lucky to have it. Where they show the same love and attention to Sam as we do as parents... Having her in our lives has made all the difference... Now we have decided that he has only just turned four so he is going to go to Jane's for this full school year but chances are he will go to Jane's the following year as well. Sure he's going to spend the rest of his life in school. So with the exemption he'll be nearly six. I think he'll be ready for school then, hopefully...

While discussing the ways that preschools and primary schools differ, Brenda also touches on the familiarity, care, and safety her son experiences within the preschool setting, clearly distinguishing this from the concept of both school readiness and schooling. Her 'roots and wings' analogy is depicted in the following extract:

I mean, I often think of this plaque I gave my parents once that said "parents give you two things, one is roots, the other, wings". That saying just doesn't work when you have a child with significant needs. The thoughts of the wings part can keep you awake at night. You have to focus instead on the roots and that's inclusion. And his preschool is like that. It's all about him and helping him fit in.

She described school as being 'a different ball game'. In her opinion school is 'all about the wings of the students and the great heights they can reach'. Signifying her worries for his future, she asks: 'What if you have a broken wing, what then?'. It seems that in such cases the role of lone educators becomes even more significant.

The potential role that educators could adopt in making inclusion possible was highlighted throughout the parent narratives. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, one such narrative is saturated throughout with references to the ways that a lone educational leader dramatically changed the lives of their child and themselves. The importance of both the choices and perspectives of such educational leaders are presented here.

The significant role of educational leaders in making inclusion possible was regularly reiterated by parents who perceived these leaders as facilitators of, or barriers to, inclusive education. The children's experiences varied based on the individual qualities of the leaders within their educational setting, and their interpretation of inclusive policy and practice. Ellen, a pre-school manager, herself, explains the anomalies associated with the Access and Inclusion Model:

I've heard of people being taken on and they're not even in the room. This would be in multiroom places, they're shopped around wherever they're needed. A child might really need them in one room and they're gone off sorting the afterschool list. Ideally, you'd nearly have people saying let's take the child with special needs because that means we'll be getting an extra pair of hands. But is it being used to give that child the best learning experience in the preschool?

She concludes that this is her 'problem with AIM', stating that in the policy, 'they are blatantly saying that...this is not for the child this is for the service'. In general, the fact that government policy on inclusive education does not outline mandatory protocol regarding the inclusion of children on the spectrum was a source of frustration for parents. Their narratives contained references to disbelief, confusion, and scepticism regarding this aspect of policy. Sandra felt that this ambiguity within inclusive education policy resulted in a strained relationship between her and pre-school staff:

I said 'this isn't your problem Stacey, I have no problems with you, I know it's management'. And the manager was right there. A guy with a business background, come on...and I was like, 'it's management telling you what to do, what he decides is important'... she was upset but I was explaining that it was a

cop out by him. Because she can't be everywhere, she can't be doing the school runs and be with my child at the same time and be sorting out all the bins!

In the next interview, Sandra again touched on the issue of policy implementation in relation to enrolling her child in local mainstream primary schools. Where various principals 'used' policy differently:

...there I was making these appointments to see if the school would be suitable for our son and they were there to see if he was suitable for their school... in the end I actually wrote out the part of the constitution that said every child has the right to education and as I was reading it out to them...

Her upset was evident, 'I was crying', but ambivalence towards her upset was equally palpable, 'one of them just said that on the ground policy didn't make much difference... she told me that her hands were completely tied that the Board of Management were against a unit and wouldn't budge on it'. Sandra was totally dismayed that this attitude came from 'other teachers, other parents, respected people in the community, a priest for God's sake...'. Evidently, the prospect of their children attending an educational setting that did not encourage or implement inclusive practice instilled fear and anguish in the parents, all of whom placed their child's right to be welcomed and included over any other desire they had for them. Ellen emphasises this, while also highlighting the role that positive relationships play in effective inclusion. She references the AIM and Aistear, noting that in accordance with both "the only way inclusion can happen is if you will gain an understanding of a child and that can only be through their parents. It's the relationships on the ground that matter...'. Central to these relationships are the perspectives of educators on both autism and inclusion.

Underlying every parent narrative was the perspectives held by parents, teachers, and the public in relation to autism. All parents referenced educators' perspectives on autism as the key factor in realising their child's inclusion in education. In fact, as mentioned earlier, this was sometimes the deciding factor in parents' choices regarding their child's educational placement. The significance of knowing that pre-school staff had participated in the LINC training was mentioned by three of the participating parents, who spoke about this positive approach to inclusion, and compared it with their own choice to adopt a strengths-based approach to autism to enhance the daily lived experience of their families. The significant positive impact that educators who adopted a strengths-based approach to autism and inclusion had on these families' lived experiences was undeniable.

Parents articulated how educators' perspectives on autism were the keystone of their child's inclusion in, or exclusion from, education. Ellen focused on this potential exclusionary aspect in particular:

There is a stigma about autism and I see now that I actually had that stigma myself. And you have that whole thing, you know the minute you tell a person that... in preschool or schools in places like that, it can change everything...

The stigma surrounding autism in educational settings emerged as a significant narrative thread. While some leaders of educational settings displayed an implicit stigma in relation to autism, one such educator, a primary school principal, explicitly voiced hers to Sandra:

She actually said like 'oh aren't you great to tell me straight out about the autism, another one would be hiding it'. And I was there saying 'sure he is amazing...he would thrive here in the school'. Sure no one knows how any child is going to get on in the school when you're at that stage.

Sandra describes being 'so hurt, so angry' and explains that 'this is what I'm up against after everything...'. She further elaborates that 'the worst part was she [the principal] was in charge of all the other teachers, all the staff, no wonder they are like that as well, having an actual problem with including children with autism'. Accordingly, parents expressed a need for the development of positive perspectives towards autism and inclusion among all educators. They referenced professional development as a means of fostering this strengths-based approach that represents an education system that is more socially, and less academically, driven. While Alice 'get[s] the whole public not understanding [autism]', she felt that:

People who are working with autistic children every day need to have autism specific training done and not just be there tirelessly trying to make our children meet the same milestones or do the same school work as everyone else in the same way as everyone else.

She again prioritises the social over the academic, saying that school 'has to be about more than results, it has to be about life'. Brenda also considers the role of expertise in inclusive education and critiques policy direction particularly in relation to reduction in the numbers of SNA. While acknowledging that 'having the courses done is so important and it does make a difference', she

highlights her concern that 'teachers are on their own now... they will be the scapegoats... if inclusion all goes pear shaped it's in the news as being totally their own fault for not having enough expertise'. This was not the only time that government responsibility for inclusion and exclusion was referenced. In fact, the contradictory social and economic choices of government, in both policy and practice, emerged, not only as a recurring narrative pattern, but as a significant factor in the daily lived experiences of these families.

Recent policy changes implemented at ECCE, primary, and post primary level regarding the inclusion of children with additional needs were viewed sceptically by parents, with particular emphasis placed on the absence of direct government action in this area. Three parents specifically referenced a governmental passing of 'the book'. Michael describes the causes for, and his response to, the lack of genuine government input in their child's life, noting that:

The government don't have the money to provide efficient, quality services. And in Ireland, people don't complain they just jog along. They just throw temporary fixes at every problem and take no responsibility... none of them must have children with needs...

He spoke of his own fight for his child, stating that he would not have any regrets, 'at the end of the day when I'm on my death bed at least I can say I did what I physically could for them, emotionally from a father perspective, from a financial perspective, we were on our own but we did all we could'. But Michael was not alone in this stance. Across the parent narratives it was suggested that while the Government has retained absolute power with regards the allocation of supports and resources for these children, responsibility for making inclusion possible lies with the families and the staff of preschools and schools. Time and time again, throughout the parent narratives, the experience of being 'on your own' was portrayed. Nevertheless, all of the parents and children had developed shared partnerships of responsibility with particular professionals. It is important to note, however, that these alliances were typically forged in response to the reality faced by each party in terms of their role in inclusion within education and wider society.

While the inclusive educational landscape in Ireland is evolving and changing, ambiguity surrounding the roles of all stakeholders in this process remains. Primary responsibility for including children with additional needs in the education system has been passed to educators. However, to successfully adopt this challenging role, and ensure inclusive education for all, positive relationships

with young children on the autism spectrum and their families are paramount. Developing these relationships is critical to the creation of inclusive learning cultures, where leaders embrace and promote the values of inclusion rather than manage the associated logistics. This research shows that alone and against the odds, some educators successfully established relationships with children on the autism spectrum and their families. Such relationships were built on shared trust, shared understanding, and shared power, and were representative of authentic inclusive leadership and practice. Moreover, they cast aside the neoliberal stance within which educators are tasked with developing productive and competitive citizens for the future, embracing instead the strengths of the children, their families and their educational settings. In this way, these relationships enhanced the lived experiences of the children and families involved in the study. It is imperative that such relationships become a central feature of inclusive policy across education settings, while also representing shared power relations across micro and macro contexts. If inclusion is to become a reality for all children, then all stakeholders must accept that together we are stronger.

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# Our Small Moments: Stories of Literacy & Learning from an Early Childhood Educator

**Margaret R. Clark**

## **Abstract:**

What role can stories play in the learning for all children? How can stories help students understand not only letters and sounds, but also the world in which they live? This life history project focuses on one veteran teacher, with over thirty years of teaching young children in an urban school district, who used the power of stories to teach her students literacy skills and understand more about their world. This balanced approach to literacy highlights how one teacher uses both instruction and care to teach her children in the current social and cultural contexts in America.

## **My favorite part of teaching? Storytelling. – Lena**

I met Lena during my first year teaching as an Assistant Professor in a teacher preparation program in a small, private, four-year university in the Northeast of the United States. Lena (a pseudonym) had reached out to find out how she could become a mentor and coach to pre-service early childhood educators. She was in the final year of teaching first grade at the local elementary school, after a career spanning thirty-two years as an educator. We talked for close to an hour in that first conversation and discussed a range of topics, including what a lifetime of teaching had taught her, what it was like to teach young children in today's social and cultural contexts, and why she was finally ready to leave the classroom. It was clear to me, from this initial conversation, that Lena was a natural storyteller, as she easily wove one story into another, painting me a picture of her life as a teacher and caregiver of young children. And it was these stories, and Lena's willingness to share them with me, which led us to many more conversations about teaching young children, about the current context of teaching in America, and our daily pedagogical practices.

Over the course of three months, Lena and I audio-recorded a series of open-ended interviews during which we talked about Lena's childhood, her years as a teacher, and her reflections on teaching as a profession. Our discussions became purposefully grounded in our shared interest in literacy practices and how stories – including the practices of storytelling and listening - can help children become successful readers and writers in the early childhood classroom. The following is a portrait of Lena's childhood and her life as an educator, storyteller, and caregiver of young children.

## **A Childhood of Stories**

Lena was born in the early 1960s in the urban capital city of a small state in the northeast of the United States. She was one of seven children in her family and not surprisingly, Lena's stories of growing up focus on the role that her siblings and parents played in helping her learn. Lena tells stories in a way that happily and naturally skip from one memory to another. Here she describes her family and upbringing:

I was born in Highland Square, that's one of the projects. My father was a garbage man....And my mother was a maid. She cleaned all these homes around here and I would go with her, sometimes. And I would also go with my dad at night - he had four jobs. And he would clean offices and a matter of fact, he worked at the local synagogue, too. And that was an experience for us kids, because we got to go to all the parties and work - we would take the coats from the people, and we even earned a little bit of tip money! You know, it's funny because I'm not embarrassed to say he would bring home all the food, all the leftovers. And we would just have a big party in the neighborhood.

Our house was the cookout house. So every weekend we had a cookout... people from the whole neighborhood just came because they knew that our family was going to have the best cookout ever. My father would go shopping and we would have fish and food and pickles, so many pickles! (laughing)... we were even known as the Pickle Family!... We set up in our little backyard. Those times were fun. And my dad's friends would come from far away and we did this party every weekend, every weekend! And you know, we had three beautiful rose bushes in our yard and I would cut them and we put them in a vase and sell them to people who came to the cookout. We also had two beautiful peach trees in our yard. My mother "peached" us to death! She made peach pie, peach cobbler, and even one time those peaches fermented, so she made some peach wine!"

When Lena describes her childhood, one common theme emerges: the role of stories and storytelling in her family:

You know, my father had a story for everything... you know, he told us stories... "I remember when..." or "And I walked for miles..." (laughing). But you know, that's what it was with him. And then when his friends came, you just heard all the stories. So that's what those cookouts were all about, standing around and telling stories... "You know, I just love to hear somebody tell a good story.... Until this day I just could sit and listen to somebody talk... I just like to hear the fun stories. I'm also a fairytale person - I just think they're so fascinating. Of course my favorite story is Cinderella, and I'm still waiting for the knight in the shining armor to come and save me and take me off! (laughing). But those stories? They let me be in my own little corner, in my own little world, and I can be what I want to be.

Lena remembers another storyteller in her life, a local woman named Ruby Stills (a pseudonym), who held weekly storytelling circles at the city public library:

You know, that's how it all started.... I love children. I love storytelling. And do you remember Ruby? Ruby Stills? She was this famous storyteller at the Highland Public Library. And she would tell these fabulous stories, she would have these costumes on. And it wasn't just one costume, she would have different ones, multiple items of clothing, according to what character she was. She acted it all out, and she changed her voices. And I was like, wow! I was mesmerized.

She was this great storyteller... You felt like you were right in the story. Like you were part of the story - you know? Her characters, those stories, they were written for me!

And you know what? Ruby Stills? I think I have a piece of her in me. Because that's who I am. My favorite part of teaching? Storytelling.

Lena was seven years old in 1967 when she started attending Unionville Elementary School, located in a small suburban town about 15 miles outside of the capital city where she lived. Lena was the first and only African-American child to attend the school, as she was part of the newly organized "Project Transport", which involved busing young African-American children out of the urban areas of the state to de-segregate the schools in the more suburban and rural areas. Lena described how her parents, who had seven children and each worked multiples jobs, reinforced the value of a good education and wanted that for their children. Here, Lena describes her first experiences of schooling at Unionville:

Project Transport was when they started the integration - where they started busing the Black children into the White neighborhoods. And so I was bused to Unionville. So yeah, so I got to know buses.... I was six or seven years old. So this was first grade. And every morning, my father would bring me to Harper Street and I would get on the bus. When I got to second grade, I had Mrs. O'Connor. She looked like Mary Tyler Moore. And I'm still trying to find her to this day. Because she's one of the reasons why I'm a teacher. Because here you are this chocolate person... You go into this school and no one else looks like you. And she - I was standing outside the door on my first day and she peeked outside and she said "Are you Lena?" and I nodded my head, yes, and she said "We've been waiting for you!" and I was like "Really?!" (smiling). That gesture? That welcome? That was everything for me.

I had good friends there... one little girl walked up to me and said, "You're chocolate!" and I said "You're vanilla!" and we became the best of friends. You know, I was the only Black girl, Black child, in that whole school and that was the early 60s. There were a bunch of us that got on that bus, but we went to different schools, and we got dropped off all over the state.

Lena's memories of her early schooling are strong, with vivid images of what it was like for her as the only African-American child to attend an all-white school for children in the suburbs. While she doesn't remember much of how she was taught in those early years, she easily remembers the people and interactions she had as a young girl. And it is these interactions, these stories, which also strongly inform who she is today as an educator.

## **The Life History Methodology**

This project used the life history method as a way to learn about one veteran teacher's experiences both in the classroom as a teacher, but also outside in the world, as a learner. Life history, for this project, involved a series of extensive interviews and a review of historical artefacts and news articles. Cole and Knowles (2001) describe the three defining features of life history:

- (1) It helps us understand how individuals interact with and within the institutional and societal contexts in which they live,
- (2) it aims to provide an exploration of the human condition which is both "just" and "dignified", and
- (3) it uses the people's stories in their own words, which can draw the reader into the interpretative process (Coles & Knowles, 2001; Labaree, 2006: 123).

In Dollard's (1949: 4) review of the method, he argued that "detailed studies of the lives of individuals will reveal new perspectives on the culture as a whole which are not accessible when one remains on the formal cross sectional plan of observation."

The process of storytelling and story-listening in the life history method is a cyclical and simultaneous method of data gathering and analysis. This intertwined process, argues Labaree (2006), allows and opens spaces for new paths of discovery and emergence, as stories that are discussed in one interview can then be followed up in subsequent interview.

As is evident in this chapter, the life history method is particularly well-suited for interviewing veteran teachers about the field of early childhood education and what they have learned, as they have moved outside of the institute in which they spent a career (in this case, multiple decades) living and teaching. In Lena's case, I met her during her final year of teaching and our conversations for this project occurred during the following year, the first year of her retirement. This distance from the classroom and the school may have provided Lena an opportunity not only to reflect on her experiences, but also critique the institutional and societal contexts in which she was teaching. In our discussions, we spent time talking about those critiques, especially the power and control that the institution of schooling had over Lena and her teaching practices, limiting her freedom to practice a pedagogy focused on care, community, and stories.

## **The Current Context of Literacy Instruction in the Early Childhood Classroom in the US**

In late 2017, the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) released the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report, also known as the "Nation's Report Card." The report found that reading scores on national assessments of American youth have remained stagnant since 1998, with just a third of students performing at the "proficient" level (NCES, 2017). Not only are students not showing any significant growth in reading ability, the report also noted that the lowest performing students across the country scored lower in reading than any previous report released over the past decade (NCES, 2017). A few months later, in April of 2018, a panel of educational researchers analysed these results and concluded that "the current instructional approach (to reading) is based on assumptions about how children learn that have been disproven by research over the last several decades – research that the education world has largely failed to heed" (Wexler, 2018). Finn and Petrilli (2014) outline how reading instruction in the early school years is solely focused on the teaching of

reading skills, including the learning of letters and sounds and decoding skills. Some argue that this skills-based method of instruction is the result of multiple national legislative acts, including both the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) from 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) from 2015, both of which require annual and national reading and mathematics assessments for all American children from the third grade to the eighth grade.

As federal funds and evaluations of schools and teachers were linked to these assessments, educators and administrators from around the country felt the increased pressure to focus on reading and math instruction in the early years (Wexler, 2018). This focus led to a reduction in the instruction of other content areas, including history, literature, science, and the arts. Reading instruction has become focused solely on a set of skills and strategies, ignoring the important role that background knowledge, cultural knowledge, and vocabulary play in children comprehending the texts that they read (Wexler, 2018). Meanwhile, multiple research studies have shown that background information and vocabulary knowledge is both learned and necessary when reading texts from the exact subject areas that are being left out of the curriculum (Recht & Leslie, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Lemov, Driggs, & Woolway, 1997; Hirsh, 2006; Willingham, 2012). So what does this mean for educators teaching and caring for young children in the classroom? For Lena, it was a direct challenge to her own holistic philosophy and pedagogy, using an embedded and sociocultural approach to learning and teaching.

### **Reading Curriculum for Lena: A Climate of Control**

When I asked Lena about the state of reading instruction in America, and specifically what it looked like for her as a teacher, she noted that it was this aspect of teaching which had become her greatest challenge towards the end of her career. She described how her school district had continually changed the literacy instruction curriculum, which was often very scripted and required all teachers to follow the same pacing and guidelines. In the following excerpt, Lena describes the ever-changing and controlled space of literacy instruction in her school, much of which was controlled by literacy consultants:

The hardest part was not being able to use my expertise. It became - you had to do what they (the administration) wanted you to do. We used to call them (the curriculum consultants) "the police". They would come into your classroom and you would have to be on the same page as the curriculum book. If they opened the door and you weren't doing exactly what you were supposed to be doing, according to that program, you got written up. It was scripted, everything, was



scripted.

When asked about the major shifts that she had seen in the curriculum over her career, Lena described the lack of science in the curriculum and the structured and rigid scripted programming for reading and writing:

Well a big shift recently was when they dropped science out of the curriculum – science! When I first started teaching - that was one of the important things in curriculum – science! In those days I had to do math, I had to do reading and writing, arts and science, and all of a sudden, science is gone! No science.

There was also no time - no REAL time - for me to sit and do a story. I used to stop and read a story after lunch every day. No story time. Why? It was all about that script. They had us on this crazy schedule and it was all about those groups – those guided reading groups. And they wanted you to change those reading groups four times within an hour. It was just crazy. So it was boom, bang, okay. 10 minutes. Okay, go, you're going now (hits her hand on table). 10 minutes, you're gone now. To where it was crazy. What are the kids going to learn in 10 minutes? And where's the joy?" Later when I asked about how her students responded to this structure, Lena describes the frustration and distress:

Our students? Some cried. Because they couldn't do the work, you know? They needed the basics of reading skills and the stories to help them understand but this (program) wasn't that. So both the kids were frustrated and the teachers were frustrated."

Lena's frustration and concern was often palpable in our conversations; wringing her hands and a deep look of concern on her face. In these discussions, we often tried to pinpoint exactly what was challenging about this kind of reading instruction, but also shifted our discussions to what did work, what was possible. Lena and I regularly discussed how to frame early literacy as grounded in stories and storytelling with young children which highlights the social, cultural, dialogic, and holistic nature of learning. In these discussions, Lena described how relating, caring for, and educating children is at the core of all good teaching. In this excerpt, Lena described to me some of her goals in her career of teaching:

I wanted to make a difference in the little ones' lives. That's what I wanted to give them...I wanted to be that mother(figure) for them. And I wanted to teach in the inner city. I didn't want to teach anywhere else, because I figured they needed me more and I could relate to them. Who that teacher is? It's all about how they can relate to the students that they are teaching. That's important,

that's a big one."

That connectedness to her students, she went on to discuss, was about race and ethnicity, but also about cultural and social understandings. Lena constructed her curriculum and methods for teaching, especially the teaching of reading and writing, with all of those understandings embedded in what the children already knew, and also what they may need during a certain time of their lives or depending on how they learned. Here, Lena described how she adapted her storytelling and teaching for all kids:

I think that getting a story... like the way that some stories...you can get a story related to maybe something that they're going through, you know, like death or a big change in their lives? We had a lot of talking pieces last year, as well. I think that also helped the kids to bring in something that that was very special to them, letting them bring a favorite story in. I would also look at the book ahead of time and pick out words that I think they may not know, and have them up (on the board) and I would break the words down, I started just chopping the words out for them, helping them learn, and even drawing pictures next to those words. And our stories were about everything – all aspects of life, even and history and art and science.

Lena's inclusive practices describe a holistic classroom curriculum and environment, where the learning was grounded in the stories that were shared. This holistic kind of classroom and instruction, while grounded in evidence-based practices and current educational research, is often a rarity when looking at the broader context of literacy instruction in America.

### **Our Small Moments: Snapshots of Lena's Storytelling Classroom**

Over the course of our time together, Lena would describe her classroom during storytelling circles:

So there are pillows all over the floor. We're on the carpet. I might have had a little rocker in the corner (especially for when I was pregnant) and I like to use a lot of puppets. So I had a lot of the puppets and even finger puppets – the little characters that you put on your fingers as you act it out. And of course, lots of books. And if they wanted to write their own stories afterwards, there was paper, pencils, markers, and also bookmarks that they could make. Just if they wanted to write. But yeah, lots of books and it was comfy, like your home. And I might turn down the lights and bring in a little lamp so they can see. So I tried to make my classroom like.. homey, you know, so they did wouldn't want to leave. (laughing) And they loved it.

One daily writing practice in Lena's classroom was focused on what she called "small moments":

I would have the kids journal and then ask them – "now tell me about that." When they came in (to the classroom), I would say "jot down your small moment" – we would call them "small moments" – you know, "just think about anything and it could be something you did last night, it could be something that you saw last night." As soon as they walked in the door, I had a journal on the table for them. And I said, "tell me something, just a small moment, just like a little snapshot, if you want to draw it, go ahead and draw it" It was just like a snapshot, take a picture and put it down on paper. And they would keep writing in the same journal. It was fun. And I would check it, I would just write the (correct) word over it, (if it was spelled wrong), but not tell them that was wrong. I just put the correct word over and I would have them take it home and read it. Every day I would read what they wrote and that, for them, was something they were always so proud of.

### **A pedagogy of Care, Learning, and Listening**

For Lena, educating children also meant caring for them, in multiple ways. Much like her childhood, she describes how in her teaching practice she took the extra effort to check-in, and focus her time and energy on the children who may have needed extra support:

Last year, with the big hurricane, a lot of kids came to us from Puerto Rico. So then you just go back to the basics...I would pull them aside and I will show them pictures and then act those words out. I swear I missed my calling for being on Broadway (laughing)!

I'm silly... I'm a big kid. I make them laugh and I do a lot of acting. And I'll just break out in song. At first that kids are like "what?" and if they say a word and it makes me think of a song, I'll start singing that song! And they will remember it that way! That's me, that's my classroom. Teaching is about who we are and how we relate. My story is I was born and raise in this city. Maybe I'm like you. Maybe I look like you. What is your story? They know that I can relate.

I would also find other people's stories. There are so many stories that you could read that make the kids say, "Oh, wow. That's like me!" So I did a lot of searching for stories. Or I would tell stories - I would make them up sometimes too! I told stories, even though they might not have been true, when I know some kid was going through something, to make them feel better. You know? Yeah, so I told my story first, or told how I felt.

This was especially true when those kids walked through my classroom door. Remember Mrs. O'Connor? She made sure that she greeted me at the door. So in all of my years I made sure that when the kids were coming in I asked them "How you doing today? I'm glad you are here."

## **Storytelling as a Moral Craft**

Throughout our conversations, Lena shared so many memories with me, both of her personal history as a child in a family, community, and school, and also of her memories as a teacher. Lena described the challenges and struggles that she faced throughout her teaching career, but also what worked well when teaching all children. So often her early positive memories of schooling mirrored those best practices that she described in her own pedagogy.

Current literacy instruction in the US shows a disturbing trend towards viewing reading, writing, and oral language as an isolated practice of skills, separate from the rest of the curriculum. The field of education has begun to describe and prescribe literacy instruction that involves direct, monologic instruction between the teacher and the child and solely focused on the skills and cognitive abilities of the child. However, educational research continues to point towards literacy practices that are social, dialogic, cultural, and deeply embedded in multiple curriculum areas. The memories that Lena shared with me highlight these best practices and are clear evidence of what developmentally appropriate practice can look like in the early childhood classroom (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Lena described the way that she embedded literacy into all of the topics of learning, using stories and books to explore topics of science, history, and the arts. She sees literacy not just as reading, but writing and oral storytelling as well. For Lena, stories can be the social acts that help children interact with one another, learning about themselves and their world.

Together, Lena and I imagined future classrooms where all stories, where all cultures, and where all histories are welcome, shared, and respected. These stories don't necessarily come from textbooks and scripted curricula, but instead from the homes, families, public libraries, and backyards of the children and teachers in the classroom. For Lena, she regularly described how to share, foster, and promote the idea that teaching isn't necessarily a scientific applied science, but instead is a craft: a craft of stories, care, learning, and teaching, or even what Tom (1980) calls a "moral craft":

I believe we can move forward, maybe it's different, maybe something new... we need to bring the storytelling back in. With all the props and all the different

voices and characters.

You know, it's funny because Ruby Stills is gone... and there is never going to be another one like her. But maybe, just maybe I should start that up. That's what I was thinking. Maybe I need to tell some more stories, visit the different libraries and tell all the different stories, the old fables, the old stories. Maybe that is just what I need to do.

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# Online was Great as We Could Access it in Our Time: Retrospective Insights on Design & Delivery of a Blended Early Childhood Degree Programme

**Deirdre Breatnach**

## **Abstract**

As noted by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2019:1), 'digital technologies can be critical enablers of education' and can offer 'flexible learning pathways'. It also highlights students' 'need to constantly upskill to realise their potential, personally and professionally' (Ibid: 11). Several universities and colleges throughout Ireland have adopted digital technologies through offering online and blended degree programmes. This paper presents the findings of staff and student evaluations regarding a blended Early Childhood degree programme which was designed and delivered by two higher education institutions in Munster. This particular programme was established to allow early years educators gain a degree qualification while continuing to work in the sector. The following article outlines retrospective insights on this degree, discusses the impact of this programme, and offers some suggestions for future consideration in the development of blended courses.

## **Introduction**

During a five-year period from September 2014 until May 2019, a blended Level 7 degree programme, the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Practice (BA ECP), was delivered jointly by two Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), namely Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick, and the Institute of Technology (ITT), Tralee. The overall aim of this inter-institutional BA ECP was to respond to demands for accessible graduate pathways in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This programme ran for three cycles –

the first cohort commenced in September 2014, and the third cohort of students graduated in October 2019. This paper describes the learning experiences of this course from the viewpoint of twelve of the staff members involved in the design and delivery of this degree as well as exploring the perspectives of twenty eight of the students from the three cohorts who have completed this blended programme. Evaluations were conducted through the use of online surveys and interviews which provided quantitative data and some qualitative commentary on engagement with the various aspects of the programme. This paper outlines the views of staff on the design and delivery of the programme and, in particular, on the transition from classroom-based learning to the online environment. The article also examines students' experiences of blended learning and how theoretical concepts and practice-based knowledge were developed within this format. It also presents discussion and recommendations for future considerations in the development of other blended programmes within HEIs.

### **Designing a Blended Degree in Early Childhood Practice**

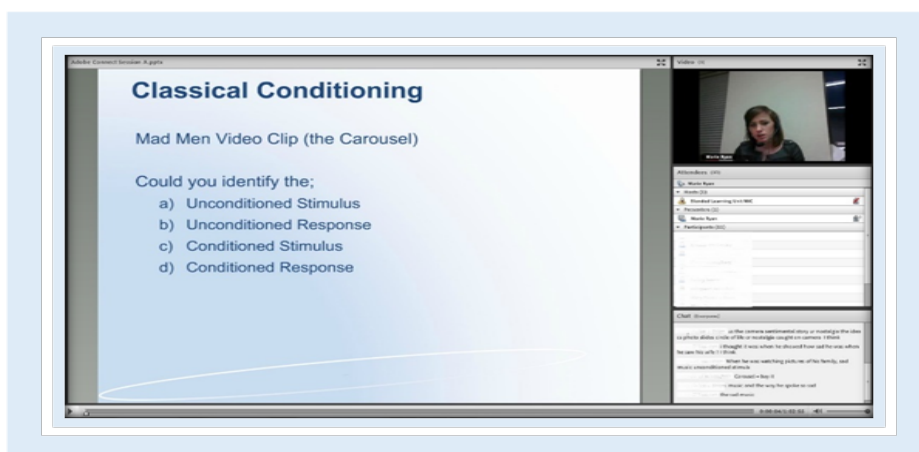
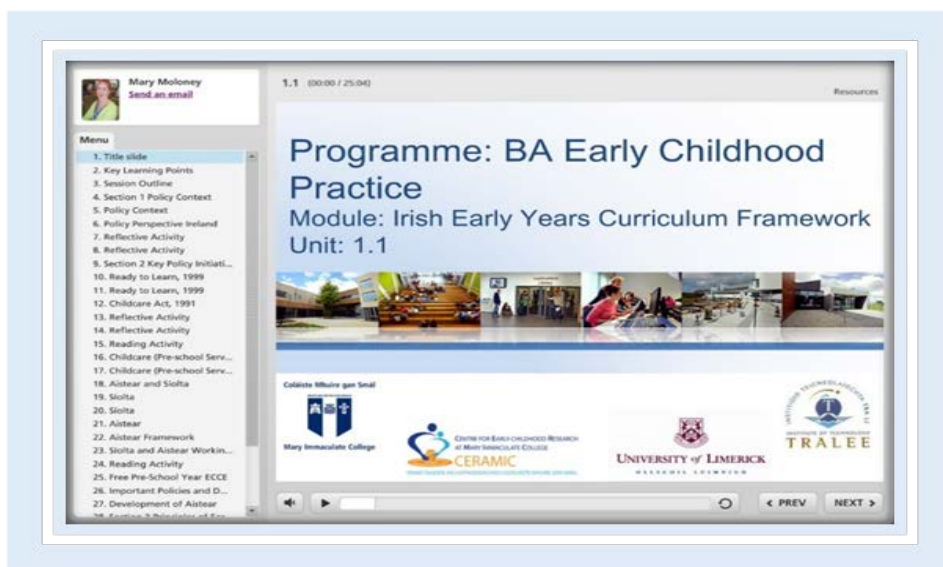
Blended learning offers students opportunities for learning in a flexible format. It is integral to how instruction is developed in colleges and universities. It is widely adopted across higher education, with some scholars referring to it as the new 'normal' (Dzubian et al., 2018). Providing meaningful learning through an online format involves engaging appropriately with relevant technological tools to support student learning outcomes (Dabbagh, Marra & Howland, 2018). The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Higher Education Authority, 2011) stresses the importance of building more flexible learning opportunities within Irish Higher Education. Thus, many Irish HEIs have responded by developing blended and online programmes. With regard to the recently launched Mary Immaculate College Strategic Plan, it emphasises that all students 'including mature entrants and learners engaging through part-time or blended modes - will be enabled to be career-ready with key skills transferable to the 21st Century workplace and the capacity for self-directed career advancement' (Mary Immaculate College, 2019: 6). Blended learning offers students opportunities for learning in a flexible format. It has 'become integral to how instruction is being delivered in colleges and universities. It is no longer a novelty and is becoming fully integrated into all teaching and learning' (Dzubian & Piaccanio, 2015: 1).

The Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Practice (BA ECP) was designed to allow students to continue to work in the early years sector while undertaking



a degree. It was a 180-credit programme and graduates were conferred with a University of Limerick Level 7 Bachelor of Arts Degree in Early Childhood Practice. Applicants were required to have a Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC) Level 6 award or equivalent (now termed a Quality & Qualifications Ireland QQI award) and to work in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. In the development phase of the programme, it was decided that the best way to share the course content was for both HEIs to deliver modules in different semesters, and thus ITT implemented modules in the Autumn semesters and MIC delivered modules in the Spring semesters. These modules related to child development, language and literacy in early childhood, the role of play in children's development, models of early childhood curricula, the pedagogy of early childhood education, legal issues in policy and practice in the area of early childhood education, professional development, and child health and wellbeing. Periods of supervised placement practice were also a feature of this degree. During the autumn semesters, students compiled work-based learning portfolios and in the spring semesters, students were required to work directly with young children for six hours per week for twelve weeks. Supervisors from both MIC and ITT undertook placement visits to the ECCE settings where the students were based in order to mentor and assess student practice. Approximately one third of the programme was delivered in face-to-face classes. The remaining two thirds were implemented through asynchronous and synchronous methods. This meant that students were able to access asynchronous material such as presentations, notes, readings, video and audio clips, activities etc. at home in their own time. There were also dedicated times for synchronous aspects when participants engaged in online discussion fora and tutorials from home. Students were also required to undertake intensive independent study for the duration of the programme.

As this was an interinstitutional programme, there were a number of initial issues for consideration within this collaboration including a registration system, student cards, library access, and the virtual learning environment itself. It was agreed that a cohesive system would be in the best interest of students studying this degree and therefore, every effort was made to ensure that students' learning experiences were broadly similar across the two HEIs. The asynchronous elements included the use of Articulate (see Fig 1), and Adobe Connect and Blackboard Collaborate were used as synchronous aspects (see Fig 2). The layout of the Articulate material followed the exact same format in both institutions.



## Staff and Student Insights on Design and Delivery of a Blended Learning Degree in Early Childhood Practice

Both the staff and the students involved in the BA ECP provided perspectives on the design and delivery of the programme. A staff evaluation followed the first delivery of the degree in 2016 and all three student cohorts were invited to participate in evaluation reviews after each cycle of the programme (2016, 2017 and 2019). These evaluative reviews focused particularly on the participants'

learning within the virtual environment as well as their engagement with the technology to support these learning processes. One of the recommendations of the National Forum's Principles and First Insights from the Sectoral Consultation on Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education is to "develop digital capacity in tandem with a strong evidence base for enhanced pedagogy" (National Forum, 2014: 13).

Specifically, the key aims of these reviews of the BA ECP were:

- To document the experiences of a blended learning environment from staff and student perspectives.
- To identify key transitions in online teaching and learning.
- To explore how theoretical concepts and practice-based knowledge can be developed within a blended learning format.
- To compare findings from these evaluations with similar programmes.
- To inform future revisions and amendments to blended programmes within HEIs.

## Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative approaches were chosen for these reviews in order to provide a broad evaluation of this learning programme. The key quantitative aspect involved a staff and student survey, whereby all twenty one staff who had contributed to the BA ECP degree and all the BA ECP students were invited to complete an online questionnaire. The staff survey was undertaken following the first cycle of the programme only, whereas the student surveys took place on three occasions after each cycle. The online survey was conducted through the use of questionnaires that were tailored to each group. Participants were invited to participate via a link to a SurveyMonkey questionnaire (SurveyMonkeyInc. 2019). SurveyMonkey is a secure password protected survey software. The surveys included rating questions and some open ended questions, and they were organised in four sections:

1. Preliminary Information
2. Transition to Blended Learning
3. Student Learning Experiences
4. Overall Feedback

Sections one to three utilised mainly rating questions such as the two examples

outlined below:

9. Having participated on this Blended Learning programme, rate your competence in terms of using technology for educational purposes.

|                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Not at all competent  | Not very competent    | Competent             | Very competent        |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

15. On a scale of 1 (did not enjoy) to 5 (really enjoyed) please rate each teaching medium

|                       | 1 (did not enjoy)     | 2                     | 3                     | 4                     | 5 (really enjoyed)    |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Asynchronous lessons  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Synchronous tutorials | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Face-to-face sessions | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

As noted in section four above, the survey also included some opportunities for participants to provide qualitative feedback through open-ended comments. These were concerned with areas such as:

1. What was the greatest learning point for you in transitioning to blended/online learning?
2. Please provide any suggestions that you feel would improve any dimension of the Module/Programme development process (Tailored to staff survey).
3. What three core pieces of advice would you give to incoming ECP students? (Tailored to student survey).

This type of commentary facilitated the inclusion of additional rich data to complement the quantitative aspect and assisted in establishing more of 'a holistic picture and depth of understanding' of a research topic (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2010: 29). All 80 BA ECP students who had completed the course over the three cycles (2016-24 students; 2017-17 students; 2019-39 students) were invited to contribute to the evaluation surveys, and 28 students of the total number participated in these questionnaires. Student involvement was not associated with any modes of assessment as, in each year, students' studies were completed fully by the time they completed the survey.

An additional qualitative aspect followed the first cycle of this degree as both staff and students were invited to participate in interviews. Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were utilised to explore perceptions of involvement in this blended learning programme. As recommended by Creswell, these interviews involved 'unstructured and generally open-ended questions that...are intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants' (Creswell, 2014: 190). The

use of open questions in a semi-structured format facilitated respondents in discussing the central concerns as they saw them (Thomas 2009). The interviews addressed a number of key questions to probe the key aims of the evaluation. Additionally, the interview format followed an interview protocol, including ice-breaker questions at the beginning of the process followed by four to five probing questions, and concluded with an expression of appreciation for the participants' time in the interviews (Creswell 2009). Samples of the interview questions for staff are outlined below:

- What were your initial thoughts on designing a blended learning module for the BA ECP?
- Describe how the design process went – e.g. what kind of support were you given etc.?
- How did creating an on-line module compare with previous experiences of designing a face-to-face module?
- Did you face any challenges in transitioning to online design of a module?
- Do you think that the blended learning approach was effective for the delivery of the BA ECP programme?
- Is there any particular advice you would give to other lecturers embarking on the design and development of an online/blended module/programme?

The student interview schedule had a similar format, as can be seen in the examples below:

- How did participating in an online degree compare with your previous experiences of learning on face-to-face programmes?
- What particular aspects of the programme did you find enjoyable/interesting?
- What particular aspects of the programme did you find challenging?
- Do you think that the blended learning approach was an effective way of delivering the BA ECP programme? If so, why/why not?
- Is there any particular advice that you would give to other students thinking about embarking on online/blended programmes?

Nine staff members and three students were interviewed in the 2016 evaluation of the programme.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All research involving human subjects requires the researcher to 'understand and address ethical issues that arise...including the need to protect the interests and ongoing welfare of research participants' (Mac Naughton, Rolfe and Blatchford, 2010: 4). The following steps were taken to minimise risk in this study. Ethical approval was sought from the Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee (MIREC), and all participants were given clear extensive information about the project - what the research was about, why it was being undertaken, and what the results would be used for, and written consent for involvement was sought (informed consent) (Hammersley, and Traianou, 2012). In addition, participants were advised that if the information from the research was to be used for presentations, reports or publications, that all identifying information would be changed to maintain privacy. In order to minimise bias, the invitation to participate in the survey was issued by the director of teaching and learning in one of the institutions after each cycle of the programme. This director had no involvement with the delivery of the programme. In a similar manner, when the interviews were undertaken in 2016, they were conducted by a third party and the interviewer had not been involved in any aspect of the design or the delivery of the degree. Furthermore, participation in surveys and interviews was voluntary, with an option to withdraw from the process at any time without consequence or fear of consequence. Research participant details were anonymised, assuring the participants of the confidentiality of the data which they had provided.

## **Data Analysis**

Due to the relatively small sample size of the surveys after each cycle of the programme, the quantitative data was presented using Microsoft Excel, where the responses to the various questions were provided (Microsoft Corporation 2018). The qualitative commentary from the questionnaires was transcribed onto a separate document, and was then coded through a phronetic iterative approach. A similar process was followed in the analysis of the interview transcriptions from 2016, whereby sustained cycles of coding and analysis were undertaken. The phronetic iterative approach is one which involves reading and re-reading the commentary to ascertain common trends within responses. Furthermore, this approach to analysis alternates between 'considering existing theories and research questions on the one hand and emergent qualitative data on the other' (Tracy 2019: 211).

## Findings: Staff Survey and Staff Interviews

Following the first cycle of the degree in 2016, surveys and face-to-face interviews with the staff who had contributed to the design and delivery of the degree were conducted. Twenty-one members of staff from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and from the Institute of Technology, Tralee, had been involved with the development and implementation of this degree, and all were invited to participate. Twelve staff members responded to the survey and nine interviews were undertaken in which the codes 'STE' and a number were used to denote the various participants. A number of findings emerged from the staff data. Survey responses indicated that staff members were not that competent with the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) see (Fig 3.), with just three participants out of twelve indicating competence with a VLE when they began to develop programme modules.

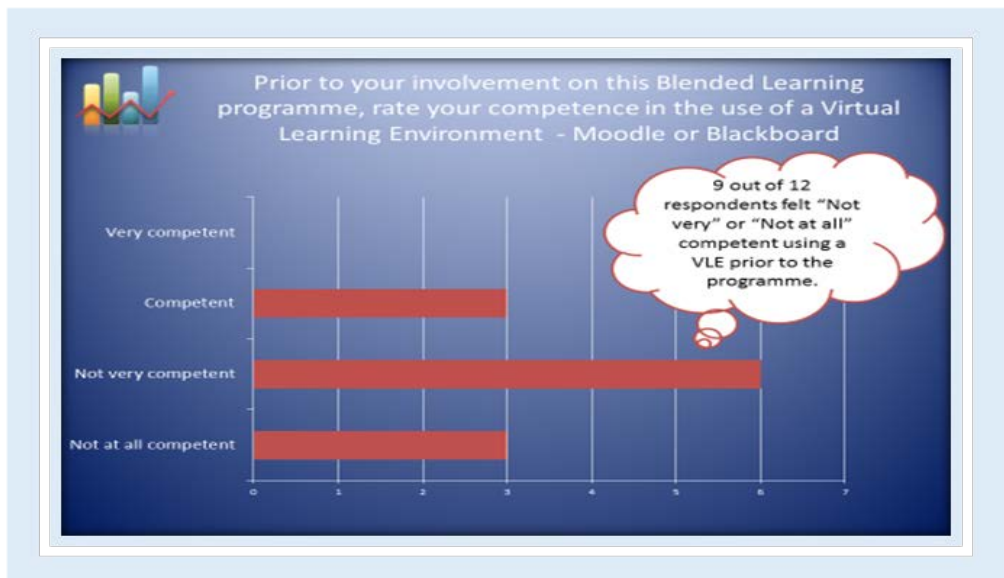
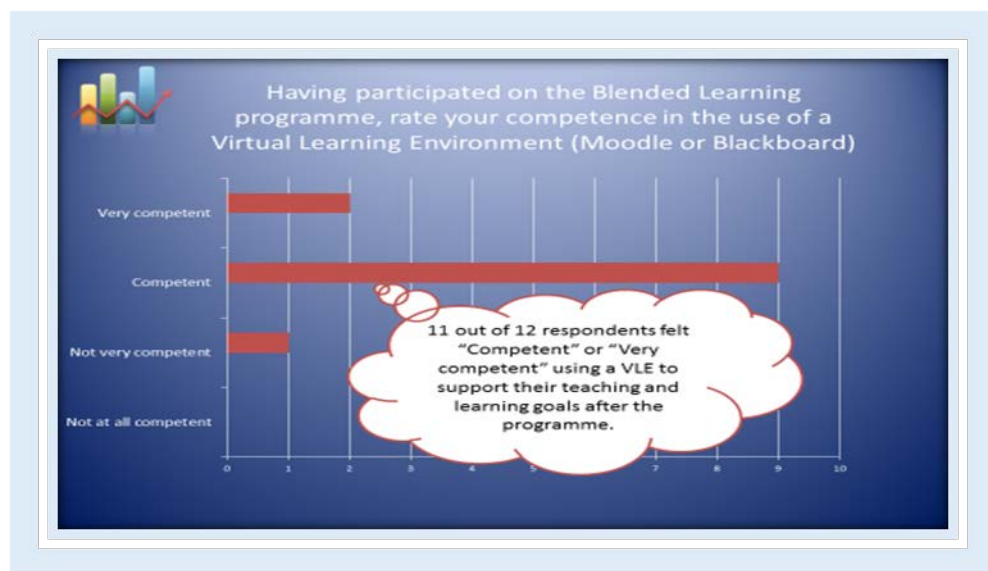


Fig. 3

In addition, within the interviews they expressed some fears and trepidation regarding transitioning to blended learning as evidenced by the following comments 'I suppose first of all I was apprehensive because I didn't, I never had, you know, worked online before that [STE 013]' and 'my initial thoughts were help [STE009]'. 'It was going to be a very steep learning curve [STE003]'. However, it was also evident that participants felt more comfortable with the technological aspects following the development of the programme see (Fig 4).



**Fig. 4**

It would appear that the support of the educational technologists within both institutions contributed to the developing confidence of the staff with VLEs as, during the interviews, each participant noted the guidance of the educational technology units within the respective colleges. '...and from a technical and blended learning point of view, and they point out what might work well, and what might need to be looked [at] to make work better, plus they really drive the quality I think, because they are the one kind of group who see everything [STE011]'. Indeed, the backing of the educational technology sections was stressed consistently in all interviews, with a number of participants describing these units as 'wonderful' and the 'main support base' of the programme design. Other case studies examining academic perspectives on blended learning have suggested that lecturers need 'appropriate holistic academic development' in order to appreciate 'how best to use technologies' and 'to how to develop effective blended learning environments' (Donnelly and Mac Avinia 2012: 19).

While the digital literacy competence of staff was enhanced by their contributions to this degree, many commented on the significant time commitment that designing a blended programme entailed, with comments such as '...and it did take a lot longer than I had anticipated. It took an awful lot longer than the time that I had allocated to it. So, yea, it was very time consuming [STE011]. 'We all underestimated the work that was involved [STE003]'. The amount of time needed to transition to a programme with a blended format has been echoed



in several research studies across various disciplines (Sweeney et al., 2016). In the development of a blended format for this particular degree, staff members from both HEIs seemed quite aware of the need to tailor the lecture content to students who were working in the ECCE field

...so it was a matter of repacking it [the degree] and also of structuring it in such a way that the learner who is not here could very easily navigate through it [STE005]. I think that the course was very good for them [the students] because it allows them to access the modules in their own time they can work their way through the modules. We have a variety of different types of assessment which also helps because it taps into you know people's different abilities it's not all essay writing which people can find quite difficult when they return to education [STE003].

Another element highlighted within the staff interviews concerned the way in which this blended programme seemed to enhance theory/practice links in student learning. The participants commented on the relevance of modules to the students' daily work.

Because they [the students] had all of that rich experience of working on the ground for so many years. And you could see... how much they were able to link their theory with practice [STE013].

Reflecting on their own work and drawing links between theory and practice and that helps the student to gain confidence in their own ability. And to realise that what they are doing you know maybe it's good but how it could also be improved so overall I think this works well from the students' point of view [STE003].

As noted previously, staff confidence in the use of technology in learning contexts increased following the design and delivery of this degree. In addition, the staff who participated in interviews outlined some of the other skills they had gained particularly in the area of academic integrity – 'always having you know the website that goes with every clip, every picture. And that's just something that I do automatically now... we learnt how important that is. So that was good learning as well [STE018].'

Staff also mentioned how the skills they had utilised in their asynchronous content had transferred to more traditional lectures, as highlighted in the following remarks.

I found for example that I started using a lot more clips, short clips, YouTube clips. Rather than describing experiments, I started showing them things a lot

more. Or I started varying, the media varying the pace a little bit in lectures, much more than I would've done before. I would've probably yapped on. Now I do change quite considerably I put people into groups more. Just, I vary it more [STE012].

I think I have gained some of those skills because I am more aware of what is out there and what will keep them [the students] entertained really [STE 003]'.

Overall, it would seem that staff acknowledged the significant time, dedication, and effort that blended learning entails. The support of educational technologists was key in terms of providing expert guidance and supporting the use of various technological tools within the VLEs. The additional learning that staff gained in areas such as module design, academic integrity, and more innovative teaching practices were also evident from the data.

### Student Perspectives on the BA ECP

While the staff evaluation of the programme provided interesting insights on the development of this blended course, the student perspectives, which were drawn from the three cycles of the programme, offered additional perspectives on this blended learning degree, particularly on the actual course implementation. As noted previously, surveys were the main data gathering instruments utilised with the student participants. Table 1 below displays the number of students from each year group that partook in the surveys and also indicates the rationale for programme participation.

| Rationale for Participation in BA ECP | 2016<br>10/24 students responded to survey | 2017<br>07/17 students responded to survey | 2019<br>11/39 Students responded to survey |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Degree Qualification                  | 10   | 7  | 11   |
| Interest in ECE                       | 2  | 2  | 1  |
| Mode of Delivery                      | 4  | 3  | 3  |
| Sectoral Requirements                 | 2  | 0  | 2  |

**Table 1**

Analysis of the data from all three cohorts of students revealed a number of recurring themes which, in the main, related to managing learning within a blended learning (BL) context.

On their commencement of the degree, students had varying levels of competence with technology and varied ranges of experience with blended learning as outlined in Table 2 below.

|                               |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|
| <b>Prior Experience of BL</b> | 2016 | 2017 | 2019 |
| <b>Number of Students</b>     | 4/10 | 4/7  | 5/11 |

**Table 2**

In relation to the adjustment from classroom-based to blended learning, more than half of the students from each cohort selected easily or very easily when responding to the question related to this transition. Students were generally satisfied with the asynchronous content of the programme as evidenced by the following comments from participants

I thought it was great to have the online lessons to refer back to. It gave great clarity and allowed me to fit studying into my schedule' [2016].

The online was great as we could access it in our time...' [2017].

More varied satisfaction levels were in evidence regarding the synchronous aspects of the degree. One student described the live tutorials as a 'lifeline' for her 'especially in the first year' [2017]. Very variable - some great tutorials, some which drained the last of your energy after a long day's work [2016]. Students stressed the need for engagement with module lecturers, noting that tutorials worked well and were a 'vital part of blended learning' [2019] when they were provided. However, students highlighted that sometimes they had 'not enough' [2019] and that in one of the semesters 'only one tutor provided live tutorials' and thus they 'never met or had any tutorial' with this particular lecturer [2019].

Socialisation activities and building effective relationships with student peers are key features of online programmes (Jordan, 2009), and BA ECP students also rated mechanisms for connection highly, for example, news fora, e-mails, and quizzes. These students also commented on supporting each other and bonding as a group of learners – network with each other. This will be your saviour as the course progresses [2017]. Blended learning was described as 'a lonely place and it can be difficult to keep perspective of your work' [2016] and this student also noted that she was 'eternally grateful' for replies to emails. It would seem that students really appreciated the opportunities for debate and

questioning afforded within live tutorials and face-to-face classes – as stressed in the following comment ‘Online was great as we could access it in our time... and the face-to-face I found as important as it gave me a chance to ask the questions I needed answering [2017]’.

Recent research on student engagement with online learning highlights issues related to students’ self-management of high workloads and work-life balance (Muir et al., 2019). Aligning work life and study commitments were emphasised by all three cohorts of these BA ECP students. When responding to questions about the manageability of the workload on a weekly basis, most students selected somewhat manageable on the rating scale and provided comments such as juggling full time work and the challenges of ‘keeping on top’ of readings and coursework [2019]. Assignment submission times were cited as stressful periods during the programme also. Indeed, when asked about key pieces of advice that students would offer to others embarking on the programme, most of their suggestions focused on scheduling appropriate study times and keeping up to date with the programme content. As noted previously, the survey, which the students completed, contained a number of open-ended questions relating to students’ overall perceptions of the programme as well as considering the key learning that they had gained from this degree. Within these responses, students referenced the theory-practice links which they had experienced within modules:

Everything that was very applied, relating to work...so everything kind of related back to what I’m doing or what I’m really excited about [2016].

It was a big eye-opener to discover that experience in the job does not equate to expertise [2017]. Linking all the modules in the last semester and putting theory into practice [2019].

## **Concluding Comments**

This paper has documented the learning experiences of an online degree from the viewpoints of the staff after the first cycle of the course and student participants across the three cycles of the programme. As well as providing key insights into how staff and students experience blended learning and their feedback on its effectiveness, it has endeavoured to offer some suggestions to inform the design and delivery of future degrees in the early childhood field. It would appear that designing, developing, and delivering an online degree in early childhood practice is a very worthwhile endeavour, as it offers practitioners in the early years sector opportunities to obtain a degree qualification while

remaining in the workplace. Nonetheless, undertaking such programmes requires significant time, commitment, and dedication by both staff members and participating students.

In particular, data from staff suggests that due allowance should be given for the design of asynchronous content as it is such a time-consuming process. Staff have also acknowledged that the support of educational technologists in addressing the digital competencies of staff is a key factor in the design of an effective programme. The evaluations of this programme from both students and staff suggest that the asynchronous content expands access, openness and flexibility for students and, in general, it is well received. However, synchronous content and effective support mechanisms seem somewhat more challenging in terms of a sustained and consistent approach that facilitates the on-going engagement of students in the learning experiences and creates 'blended learning environments' that 'find ways of creating social interaction through more collaboration' (Güzer & Caner, 2013: 4602). Thus, the data which has emerged from these cycles of the BA in Early Childhood Practice recommends that the focus in future blended degrees in the ECCE field should be the development of high quality relevant asynchronous material coupled with synchronous tools and resources which allow students to enhance their expertise in the ECCE area and to engage meaningfully with the content of the programme.

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# Student Paper 1: Promoting Inclusion in Early Years Care and Education

**Fionnuala O' Malley**

## **Introduction**

Children begin to notice differences between people very early in life (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Lindon, 2012; Hawkins, 2014), and are capable of holding prejudices from the age of 3 (Connolly, 2007). Children are naturally curious about the world around them, however, whether or not prejudice emerges is influenced by many factors, including the attitudes and behaviours of the adults in their life. One such adult is the early years practitioner, who plays a crucial role in addressing prejudice and inequality during the formative stages of a child's life (DCYA, 2016a; Derman-Sparks, 2013; Murray & O' Doherty, 2001). Left unattended, prejudice can result in stereotyping, discrimination, and distress. This can negatively impact learning opportunities, wellbeing, and outcomes for children. By applying an inclusive, anti-bias practice approach, the practitioner can support every child to feel equally respected, cherished, and able to participate fully in their learning. The anti-bias approach puts equality and diversity at the heart of the organisation and is an integral part of quality practice. This paper examines the role of the practitioner in challenging prejudice and providing inclusive early education to young children. It includes a critique on the theories of how prejudice develops in children as well as examination of best practice models, with a particular focus on the anti-bias approach, and reference to underpinning guidelines and frameworks.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Prejudice is complex. It is often hidden and deeply embedded in people's inner thoughts and values. Murray & Urban (2012, p.31) explain prejudice as

'pre-judgement and the formation of opinion without regard for evidence or reason....a negative belief about or attitude towards a person who belongs to a group'. Discrimination is the negative behaviour that emerges from prejudice. The literature offers a range of theories to explain how prejudice develops in children. One of the early theories proposed is the inner state theory, which claims that prejudice is linked to emotional maladjustment as a result of strict, authoritarian parenting, (Adorno et. al., 1950), however, it does not take account of the child's active participation in learning or social context. Alternatively, cognitive development theory (Piaget & Weil, 1951; Katz, 1976; Aboud, 1998) does recognise the child's agency and proposes that prejudice is linked to development stages of the child. The young child displays preference for the familiar and rejects the unknown, with prejudice peaking at around age seven, slowly reducing over time as the child's cognitive skills develop (Aboud, 1998). While this links to the principle of the child as an active learner in the national curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009), it does not explain why prejudices remain in older children, nor does it recognise the social impact on early learning (Nesdale, 2001).

In contrast, a number of theories sit within a social context. One of the original writers on prejudice, Allport (1954), proposes that individuals categorise people into groups or stereotypes because it is an easy way to make sense of the world, using socially constructed assumptions and generalisations. Social groups are also at the core of social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which is strongly connected to the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging (NCCA, 2009), where the child's self-esteem is linked to their social identity. In SIT, individuals define themselves through their social identity. The child identifies with a particular group, the 'ingroup', and compares and looks unfavourably at others, the 'outgroups', who may be subject to stereotyping and discrimination by the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Membership of the ingroup promotes feelings of belonging and positive self-esteem, which motivates people to belong to them.

Furthermore, social reflection theory outlines how stereotypes of the ingroups and outgroups are reinforced by the prevailing attitudes and behaviours of wider society (Sherif & Sherif, 1969), and that children learn prejudice from social groups, especially parents. Research shows individuals tend to prefer their own group, whether in competition with each other (Sherif & Sherif, 1969) or not (Tajfel, 1978), although working together can reduce friction (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). These social context approaches link to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which highlights how the child learns by observing and imitating others.



It also links to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural learning, where children learn by interacting with others in their own culture, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model, which recognises the influence of environmental factors on early learning. Furthermore, social learning is reflected in the Síolta quality standards of Identity and Belonging, Interactions and Parents and Families, which recognises the wider social context of learning (CECDE, 2006). Although social identity and reflection theories explain why children prefer ingroups and remain loyal to groups (self-esteem, belonging), they, nonetheless, fail to take account of the child's agency and cognitive development. Nesdale (2001) extended the ingroup/outgroup concept with developmental social identity theory, which proposes that development of prejudice is linked to both cognitive development processes and social processes. Interestingly, it appears young children prefer their ingroup, the same as adults, however, they do not necessarily dislike outgroups, in contrast to adults (Nesdale & Flessner, 2003), highlighting the opportunity for early intervention by the practitioner.

## **Inclusion Models**

Prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination can limit learning opportunities and outcomes (Connolly, 2007; Bradbury, 2014) and cause great distress for children and families (Garra, 2011; Gray & Donnelly, 2013). However, 'discrimination and inequality, it seems, are deeply rooted in Irish society' (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001, p.18), and despite some slow and steady change, prejudice remains an issue in Irish society (McGreill, 2011; Murray & Urban, 2012). This is despite numerous measures to prevent bias in society, such as equality legislation which outlaws discrimination on nine grounds, including culture, disability, gender and religion (IHREC, no date). In terms of the early years sector, regulations outline how every child's 'learning, development and wellbeing' must be supported within the setting (DCYA, 2016, p.18), and children's rights are underpinned by principles of participation, inclusion, and equality (UNCRC, 1989). Furthermore, these children's rights underpin national frameworks and strategies, including Síolta (CECDE, 2006), Aistear (NCCA, 2009), early years strategy 'First 5' (Ireland, 2018), and inclusion charter and guidelines (DCYA, 2016a). Historical approaches to inclusion in Ireland have focused mostly on minorities and how to support them to integrate to Irish society, for example, assimilation, where the minority culture was expected to adopt the values of the majority culture (NUI Galway, 2014).

However, fully inclusive practice must include the majority culture and all types of diversity, including disability, gender, language, and so on, not just culture

differences. Persona dolls have been used successfully in the early years, which involves the practitioner using large dolls, each with unique personalities and culture, to explore and develop empathy. They support children to understand and accept diversity (Murray & Urban, 2012; Lindon, 2012) in a way that can be tailored to the child and context. Another model, 'Respecting Difference', was a media initiative delivered to school children in Northern Ireland. It consisted of cartoons which featured the topics of difference, exclusion, and prejudice through a diverse group of children in a playground. Evaluation of the project showed a positive change of attitudes in children towards difference, inclusion, and empathy, and higher levels of tolerance and trust between communities (Collins, 2015). Internationally, the Reggio Emilia education approach can support children's cultural and social development through the child-centred ethos, strong connection to families, and flexible curriculum framework if offers (Durden et. al., 2015). In the USA, the anti-racism approach views schools from the minority perspective as reflections of a wider society of injustice and inequality, and proposes an activist, intensive approach to combat racism from a young age before it becomes accepted and normalised by the child (Husband, 2012). Crucially, however, the success of any of these models in promoting inclusion is subject to how the practitioner interprets and applies them.

## **Anti-bias Approach**

Encompassing many of the positive features of the above models, the anti-bias approach (Derman-Sparks, 1989) is the current model of best practice for the early years based on inclusion, equality, and diversity, where 'all children and their families are recognised, respected and protected from any form of prejudice or discrimination' (DCYA, 2016a p16.). The approach focuses on changing attitudes and practice so that every child is supported (Start Strong, 2013). The anti-bias approach is a goal oriented framework and has been successfully adopted in many countries including Ireland (Murray & O' Doherty, 2001; DCYA, 2016a). Critically, Derman-Sparks (2013) highlights the important role of the practitioner - anti-bias practice does not just happen. Furthermore, the early years is a critical time to intervene, before negative attitudes become entrenched (Hawkins, 2014). Using this activist approach, the practitioner can support all children to enjoy full access, full participation, and maximum outcomes in the setting.

It does not mean treating all children the same, as children will require different supports to fully participate. Furthermore, contrary to other equality models, it includes all diversity, for example, disability and gender as well as culture, and

targets both majority and minority groups. The anti-bias approach underpins Síolta, in particular the principles of Equality and Diversity and the standard of Identity & Belonging. 'Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education' (CECDE, 2006, p.7). The values of inclusion, equality, and diversity also thread through Aistear, particularly the theme of Identity & Belonging, which is about 'children developing a positive sense of who they are' and feeling valued and respected (NCCA, 2009, p.25). The anti-bias approach outlines four goals for children and four for adults to guide inclusive practice in the setting, although the practitioner must first attend to the adult goals before they are in a position to realise children's goals. Goals for the adult focus on personal reflection, building knowledge, building practice skills, critical reflection, and engaging with families (Murray & Urban, 2012). Goals for the child centre on supporting individual and social identity, fostering empathy and acceptance of difference, critical thinking, and empowerment to stand up to discrimination (DCYA, 2016a).

### **Role of the Practitioner:**

'Deepening our understanding of who we are now and how we came to be that person is at the heart of being a strong anti-bias teacher' (Derman-Sparks, 2010, p.22). A key theme emerging from the literature is the fundamental importance of critical reflection on equality and diversity by the practitioner (Murray & Urban, 2012; Lindon, 2012; Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014; Durden et. al., 2015; DCYA, 2016a). In other words, in order for the practitioner to effectively support the child's identity and address prejudice, they must first interrogate their own values and beliefs in the same area, be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions, and to challenge 'accepted' inequalities in the setting. As prejudices and stereotypes are often embedded within the individual, the practitioner can unconsciously pass on their own bias to young children (Lindon, 2012; Durden et. al., 2015). Furthermore, changes to attitudes and values must be across the entire setting, including policies, procedures, recruitment, imagery, welcome packs, and open days. The entire system, as well as the individual, must be competent and aligned (CoRE, 2011). The practitioner may have to review their knowledge base in order to root out bias or outdated information, for example, questioning the validity of a 'universal' child development theory. The importance of critical reflection is reinforced in the Síolta principle Role of the Adult and the quality standard Professional Practice (CECDE, 2006). The national inclusion guidelines can support the practitioner to kickstart the process individually, and in the setting, it is designed to 'provoke questions, challenge thinking and offer

advice and support for change' (DCYA, 2016a) and contains a range of prompts and tools. Key for the adult is to be pro-active in enabling equality (Lindon, 2012), don't wait for a child with a disability or from an ethnic minority to arrive as anti-bias practice is for everyone. Engagement with families which is meaningful and respectful is essential for inclusive practice, and to support identity and belonging. The child's family are the most important people in children's lives (Connolly, 2007), their primary educator (NCCA, 2009; Hayes, 2013), and the people who know them best. Every child accumulates knowledge specific to their culture from home, even those considered disadvantaged. By accessing these 'funds of knowledge' (DCYA, 2016a, p.15) about the child's life, the practitioner can create relevant and engaging learning experiences in the setting. It may be more challenging to engage with some families, for example, due to language barriers or fear of discrimination, however, by explaining it is for the benefit of the child and showing empathy and sensitivity, this can be addressed. As well as interactions, the practitioner can use the physical environment to show all families are valued and equally important in the setting, for example, through diversity in its posters, artwork, books, toys, and resources. It is important that all families see themselves represented in the setting (Murray & Urban, 2012). One way to do this is to create a Family Wall display, where children can bring in photos of their family and home life, which provides opportunities for meaningful conversations and can act as a starting point for changing practice (Murray & Urban, 2012). Furthermore, the practitioner may be the person responsible for accessing external support for a child through the Access and Inclusion programme (DCYA, 2016b), which will require engagement with both families and external experts.

In addition, the practitioner may need to invest some time in building knowledge on diversity issues and the correct terminology to use (DCYA, 2016a) because 'words matter' (Lindon, 2012). This will support them to engage with both children and families in an empathetic, respectful, and informed manner, and may include consulting with families on the appropriate terminology to use or seeking advice from specialist agencies. The practitioner is a role model in the setting to both children and colleagues and it is important to lead by example (Lindon, 2012), for example, 'new communities' may be a more appropriate phrase than 'non-nationals' to describe ethnic groups living in Ireland. Training in the anti-bias approach has proven to be highly successful in supporting practitioners to provide more inclusive, better quality practice (DCYA, 2013; Cooke, 2013), although it is not always sufficiently valued by early education training programmes (Derman-Sparks, 2013). Furthermore, it is often

costly to provide diversity training (Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014), creating an additional barrier.

The goals for the child can be addressed by the practitioner through the curriculum, environment, interactions, and ethos of the setting. The first goal focuses on developing the child's identity and belonging, both as an individual and as part of a social group. When children feel a strong sense of self-identity and belonging, they feel more secure, confident, and able to learn (NCCA, 2009), and can start to understand and accept difference (Hayes, 2013). The practitioner can support positive identity formation through strong relationships which validate and respect each child's background, culture, language, abilities, gender, and so on. Furthermore, the curriculum and physical environment of the setting can support positive self and group identity, for example, talking about different families at circle time or empty packs of food stuffs from all cultures in the home corner. It is also important to equality proof the physical environment, for example, universal physical access, or imagery featuring lots of diversity. The practitioner must also be mindful of how to support the multiple identities of children, for example, a female child born in Ireland to Chinese parents who plays football represents different identities, some of which may be in conflict with each other. The second goal looks at fostering empathy and acceptance of diversity (DCYA, 2016a). For many children, starting in the setting, it may be their first real experience of people who are different to them and their family. The practitioner can support children to communicate and interact across differences through active engagement and role modelling, activities on emotions and feelings, correcting bias, and providing accurate information. Books, puzzles, and toys featuring a wide range of diversity can support children to become comfortable with difference. The third goal for the child matches the third goal for the adult, which is to think critically about diversity and bias, highlighting the strong link between both sets of goals. This goal involves the adult being informed about diversity, perhaps through a network or by accessing resources from agencies such as Pavee Point or the National Disability Authority in order to share accurate information and challenge stereotypes and misinformation (DCYA, 2016a). It includes using the appropriate terminology and helping children identify phrases and images which are biased and unfair. Goal four expands on goal three, and involves empowering children to stand up to discrimination, as they begin to recognise injustice and unfairness. The practitioner can support this through listening to the child, by offering language and tools to address inequalities at an age-appropriate level, by being in tune to subtle bias, and acting as a positive role model.

## Conclusion

Children start to notice difference and display preferences at a young age, and through both cognitive and social learning processes, this can develop into prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice continues to exist in Ireland today and can hinder the child's ability to fully access, participate, and develop in the early years, in addition to causing hurt and distress. However, the early years practitioner can intervene in a positive way to support identity and belonging of the child and family through respectful and meaningful relationships, backed up by strong practice skills and knowledge around inclusion, equality, and diversity. An essential element of inclusive practice is critical reflection by the practitioner, to interrogate values, attitudes, and bias before being able to support the child and family. By using inclusive practice in the setting, the practitioner can foster empathy and understanding of diversity and support children and adults to challenge stereotypes and negative attitudes. The anti-bias approach offers the practitioner a goal-oriented framework to do this through the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion which will support and empower the child not only in the setting, but in the wider world too.

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# Student Paper 2: A Smiling Face Transcends All Language Barriers. Supporting Transitions for Children + Families with English as an Additional Language into An Irish Preschool: Educators' Perspectives.

**Irena Chlumecka**

## **Abstract**

Transitions in Early Childhood Education (ECE) have been receiving attention among researchers globally. The emphasis is stronger on the move from preschool to primary school, while transitions from home to preschool have received less attention. It has been noted in recent decades that the world's population has been far from stationary, and as such, there is an increasing number of children being exposed to more than one language. This case study explored the experiences of three early childhood educators in one preschool in Ireland as they supported transitions for children with English as an additional language (EAL) into the preschool. A qualitative approach was used in gaining the educators' perspectives through face-to-face interviews and filling in a short questionnaire. Previous research highlights the benefits of maintaining children's first language in learning subsequent languages, as well as helping families preserve their cultural heritage and a sense of identity and belonging. The findings from this study suggest that there is a need for a more centralised, research-informed approach to children with EAL in Irish early childhood settings.

Transitions are defined by many researchers as a change of environment, as well as the adjustment to the new environment, both on the physical and psychological level (Lam & Pollard, 2006; Page, Clare & Nutbrown, 2013). In

early childhood education (ECE), they are sometimes referred to as horizontal transitions (through the setting) or vertical transitions (from one setting to another) (Lam & Pollard, 2006; O'Connor, 2018). Guo (2017) further considers transitions as both the child's adjustment to the new environment and the new environment's inclusion of the child. Bridges (1991, as cited in Prendeville and Allen, 2002) makes the distinction between change and transition where change represents the physical aspect of the process, while transition encompasses the psychological adjustment of the individual to the new situation. He further outlines three phases of transitions: a) the ending of something familiar, or in Fabian's (2007) words, "leaving the comfort zone"; b) the neutral zone, where the known has ended but the unknown does not yet feel comfortable; and c) the new beginning, which takes place after letting go of the comfortable and spending some time in the neutral zone. In the example of moving from home to preschool, this represents leaving the familiarity of the home environment, the later stages of the transition process, and finally, the completed process where the child becomes comfortable within the preschool.

## **Theoretical Underpinning**

From the viewpoint of a Bio-Ecological Model of Human Development, Bronfenbrenner (1981, p. 6) talks about "ecological transitions" in children's lives, referring to the role of the various environments that influence the child's developmental trajectory and their interconnection during transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). It is these immediate environments or microsystems – such as home and preschool or primary school – that directly influence the child's development and the quality of interactions between these environments. The mesosystem further plays a crucial role in their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In Bronfenbrenner's terms, it is these interactions between the microsystems that strengthen the proximal processes between the child and his or her environments, allowing them to become the agents within the change.

## **What to Expect During Home to Setting Transitions?**

Starting pre-school is often the first time a child will be separated from their parents or primary caregivers (Lam & Pollard, 2006; O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014; O'Connor, 2018). This often evokes an array of emotions such as stress and anxiety for the child and their parents (Thyssen, 2000; Lam & Pollard, 2006; Docket & Page et al., 2013; Lam, 2013; Perry, 2013, 2014; O'Connor, 2018) and educators (Prendeville & RossAllen, 2002; Docket & Perry, 2014), conversely elements of excitement and anticipation of new experiences (Thyssen, 2000;

Lam & Pollard, 2006; Vogler et al., 2008; Page et al., 2013; Docket & Perry, 2014), and the feeling of “moving up” (Fabian, 2007, p. 5). Transitions should never be seen as once-off events (Prendeville and Allen, 2002; O’Kane, 2016). They are dynamic processes that could last for one week or as long as three months, and depend on the individual characteristics of the child (Lam & Pollard, 2006), the environments they are transitioning between, and the quality of interactions that occur throughout the process (Vogler et al., 2008).

During transitions children are not only changing the physical environment, but also “crossing the cultural boundary” between home and the setting (Lam & Pollard, 2006, p. 123; Fabian, 2007). While this is true for all children, for those with EAL, the language barrier (Kurban & Tobin, 2009; Guo, 2017), and the sometimes stark cultural differences within their new learning environment (Fabian, 2007; Guo, 2017) are added disadvantages.

## **Continuity of Care during Transitions**

One factor that influences the process of transitions for children is the continuity of their experiences from home into the setting (CECDE, 2006; Lam & Pollard, 2006; Fabian, 2007). Lam and Pollard (2006) describe continuity of care as the transitions experienced between two settings of a similar nature, such as from home to a childminder, while discontinuity occurs when the two environments are different in terms of culture, language, and expectations, such as the move from home to preschool.

Continuity of care can be achieved by several strategies, including effective communication between educators and families and having in place relevant policies and procedures (Prendeville & Allen, 2002; CECDE, 2006; Fabian, 2007; NCCA, 2015). Bronfenbrenner specifies in his writings, as early as in 1981 (p. 6), that “information in each setting about the other” strengthens the transition process for the child. In practice, this reiterates the importance of exchanging information between parents, educators, and other professionals involved in the children’s lives to ensure a smooth transition process. In terms of policies and procedures, it is now required under the Quality Regulatory Framework (Tusla, 2018) that settings have a ‘settling-in’ policy. A settling-in policy is described by Docket & Perry (2014) as a child-centred document that is co-constructed with all stakeholders. It serves as a guide for educators to offer consistent transition routines.

Educators in Ireland have access to sample policies which they can adapt to the needs and context of their settings. The sample settling-in policy (available

at <http://www.tusla.ie>) mentions a child's first language several times: it acknowledges the additional difficulties of families with EAL during the transition process; it stresses the importance of adapting routines to support children's first language; it encourages the use of some words from the child's first language; and advises parents to continue using their first language at home. In the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (NCCA, 2015), available to educators in Ireland, the Transitions Pillar offers several video resources as well as an effective self-evaluation tool to allow educators to reflect on their practice during transitions. However, within the Transitions Pillar, there are six Irish research documents about the transition to primary school, but none for the home-to-setting transition. Similarly, in the 'Examples and Ideas for Practice' section, there are 14 video resources for primary school transitions, but only two for home-to-setting transition, pointing to an imbalance in information and possible gap in research with regard to this important transition for young children.

### **Language as an Empowering Tool: A Theoretical Perspective**

Language helps us express and share our thoughts, feelings, humour, and knowledge with those around us (Honig, 2007). The important role of language in children's development is documented in many studies (Han, 2012; Honig, 2016). It is well established that human brains are predisposed to the acquisition of language, but the mechanisms needed in order to develop it optimally are still a contested issue. Let us briefly consider language acquisition from the perspectives of the two most influential theorists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, as portrayed by Feldman and Fowler (1997). According to the authors, while recognising the importance of language development in humans, Piaget was known for placing less emphasis on the role of language in an individual's cognitive development. He argued that language, as any other form of knowledge, is acquired through the same process of "equilibration, maturation, social transmission and experience" (p. 202) and thus, there are no specific tools required for teaching it to human infants, although interaction with others is necessary for this to occur. Conversely, Vygotsky considered language as the most important human ability, one that is passed culturally by conveying word meanings, sharing literacy, and inter-generational literature. For Vygotsky, language is the main tool through which all other learning and knowledge is acquired. This emphasis on the socio-cultural aspect of language acquisition leads current researchers to acknowledge the pivotal role of parents or primary caregivers and early childhood educators in language development (Kuhl, 2004).

## Supporting Children with EAL in Early Childhood Settings

There is an increasing number of children with EAL joining early childhood settings both within Ireland (Mhic Mhathúna, 2008) and globally (McCarthy et al., 2014; Whiteside, Gooch and Norbury, 2017). This change calls for a shift in support for families with EAL in our settings. This can be achieved by firstly, the educators being familiar with the benefits of maintaining a first language or bilingualism and secondly, by adopting effective strategies that support children's transitions with due consideration of potential language barriers and benefits of bilingualism. McCarthy, Mahon, Rosen, & Evans (2014) state that, within immigrant communities, children are exposed exclusively to the home language (L1) before learning the second language (L2), usually upon entering a preschool setting. This is known as sequential bilingualism as opposed to simultaneous bilingualism, where children are exposed to two languages equally from birth (McCarthy et al., 2014; Winsler et al, 2014).

Educators are uniquely positioned to inform parents when their child starts preschool of the benefits of maintaining first language and to reassure them that children typically learn the second language in their own time (Roberts, 2008). Winsler and colleagues (2014) and Roberts (2008) further state that children with EAL have a better chance of learning a second language if they have a good foundation in their home language. Sometimes immigrant parents may feel their child will suffer if they do not know the language of the setting they are joining (Winsler et al., 2014). This was the case for one parent in Rodríguez's (2015) study of three bilingual families in the US. In this study, the author outlines factors that affect successful bilingualism, such as parental attitude and a society's approach to minority languages versus the host country's language. In other words, parents must want their child to maintain their first language in order for both languages to be learned successfully. As the primary caregivers, they decide to what degree this will occur and parents depend on the support and expertise of the educators to guide them.

Extensive research in the area of bilingualism has confirmed several benefits, including higher cognitive functioning (Rodríguez, 2015; Winsler et al., 2014), better outcomes in social and emotional development (Honig, 2016), and economic benefits (Rodríguez, 2015) through wider career opportunities. Due to being exposed to two languages from an early age, receptive language has been observed to be higher in bilingual children than their monolingual peers (Honig, 2016). In the longitudinal study by Winsler et al., (2014) the authors further attributed benefits to bilingualism such as promoting cognitive development in multiple domains including higher meta-linguistic awareness

as well as processing of information. In the same study, children who were exclusively exposed to L1 at home had better outcomes in terms of English literacy (L2) during their preschool years than any of the other groups in the study. Thus, while this study is not about bilingualism, it is related to benefits of maintaining first language, which ultimately lead to children becoming bilingual to some extent.

### **Adopting Effective Strategies.**

Educators have been advised to examine any personal cultural expectations in order to most effectively welcome EAL families and support children's home language in the new setting (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). First and foremost, children must be regarded as individuals in their own right, regardless of their language, culture or ethnic background (Mhic Mhathúna, 2008). Kernan (2007) stresses that early childhood settings are usually the first places where children will encounter cultural diversity. Therefore, educators must ensure that diversity and inclusion are perceived as current issues relevant to all, making children "feel proud of their own identity" (Kernan, 2007, p. 21).

When considering the stages of language development in children of preschool age, interactions between educators and children are critical (Wyse & Bradford, 2008). This is evident from Aistear (NCCA, 2009), where each of the learning goals begins: "In partnership with the adult, the children will..." followed by the specific goal. The development of oral language skills depends highly on the quality of interactions within both the environment at home and in early childhood settings (Kuhl, 2004). As well as effective, consistent strategies, educators must provide a literacy rich environment in the second language which will most likely be the language of the primary school to which the child progresses. Positive educator-child interactions recognise children's individual needs as well as stimulating their language development (Pianta, Downer, Hamre 2016).

Some strategies to support continuity of care for children with EAL during transitions into the setting include: learning and using key terms from the child's first language (NCCA, 2015); understanding key cultural differences between educators' culture and that of the incoming families in order to show their culture is accepted in the setting and their language is valued; and actively communicating with parents and guardians in both verbal and written form about their child's learning. Body language, including gestures and pointing, is another communication strategy (Honig, 2016). Hooks' earlier work (2008, p. 103) supports this research by stating that educators must have "both

knowledge and understanding of various ways to communicate without words including the use of body language.” Finally, it is well documented that play is central to children’s learning and development (Canning, 2007; Kernan, 2007; Banerjee, Alsaman & Alqafari, 2016). Play that is interesting to children has the potential of being an effective method for learning (Banerjee et al., 2016), by supporting developing literacy skills where educators create play environments that promote collaboration between peers, partaking in conversations, and develop wider vocabulary. Canning (2007, p. 228) further places emphasis on play as an empowering tool for children to “find their own voice.” She argues, in relation to peer relationships, that for children to be empowered in play, they must be able to understand the game or a role-play. This can be particularly challenging for children with EAL and requires skilled educators to provide opportunities for collaborative play, while negotiating language differences. Together, the extensive literature reported here on important considerations around supporting the transition to preschool for all children, and especially children for whom English is an additional language, indicates additional research is required in Ireland on how educators feel about, and approach, this important transition for young children into preschool classrooms.

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# APPENDICES

## SUBMITTING A PAPER

A Submission Form and Signed Statement should accompany papers submitted for journal consideration. Papers should be formatted in accordance with the guidelines and the stated criteria. All documents should be sent to An Leabhbh Óg: [anleabhog@gmail.com](mailto:anleabhog@gmail.com)

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[www.anleabhog@gmail.com](mailto:www.anleabhog@gmail.com)

## ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

OMEP Ireland, c/o Dr Judith E. Butler, President, OMEP Ireland, Dept. of Sport, Leisure and Childhood Studies, Cork Institute of Technology, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland.

## AN LEANBH ÓG EDITORS

Dr Judith E. Butler (OMEP President; Cork Institute of Technology); Dr Frances Clerkin (Cork Institute of Technology); and Dr Vanessa Murphy (Cork Institute of Technology).

## SUBMISSION FORM

A submission form should accompany the paper submitted to An Leabhbh Óg, Journal of Early Childhood Studies. It may also be downloaded in MS Word format from the Publications page of the OMEP Ireland website: <http://www.omepireland.ie/publications.html>

- Title of Paper;
- Authors;
- Affiliation (organisation, university, etc., if applicable);
- Corresponding author;
- Address for correspondence;
- Email address.

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**Signed Statement to accompany paper:**

- The paper being submitted herewith is my/our own original work. It has not previously been published elsewhere.
- I have followed ethical guidelines throughout this research.
- I have obtained permission in writing from parents/guardians for any photos of children that are included (if applicable). I have obtained all necessary permissions for contents, including tables, graphs, and images from works by others (if applicable, please contact the editors for clarification if you have any doubts as to whether this applies).

**ALO PEER REVIEW PROCESS**

ALO operates a double-blind review process. Reviewers are not given the name/identity of the author(s). Similarly, the author(s) are not given the name/identity of the reviewers. Each anonymised paper is reviewed by two reviewers. Authors receive feedback from both reviewers and are given the opportunity to resubmit the paper.

- ALO has a list of national and international reviewers; the majority of whom hold a PhD.
- When a paper is received by ALO, it is prepared for peer review by completely anonymising the document.
- It is then sent to two reviewers from the list.
- Reviewers send the feedback forms to the editors of ALO.
- An anonymous version of feedback from both reviewers is then sent to the author of the paper.
- The author may resubmit, taking cognisance of the feedback, within a stated timeframe.
- The amended submissions, along with all feedback information, is then considered by the ALO editorial team.

Academic papers received will be sent for anonymous peer review, and authors will be notified of the results in due course. The decision of the Editor is final in any matter relating to the publication or non-publication of papers.

- Papers should be formatted in accordance with the guidelines below. Attention should be paid to the specified length (3,000 to 5,000 words).

The specified length does not include the bibliography/reference list.

- Please apply Harvard or APA referencing system for both in-text citation and bibliography listings.

Non-academic papers (e.g. practical suggestions for activities to promote early learning or factual accounts of programmes or visits) may be submitted for publication in the From the Field section of the journal.

- Non-academic papers - specified length or referencing criteria do not apply.
- These papers may be published at the discretion of the editorial committee.

## **PAPERS SUBMITTED SHOULD MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:**

- Papers should be original, and the work of the author(s). They should not be under consideration by another journal and they should not have been published elsewhere.
- The name, address, institution or affiliation, if applicable, and contact details (phone, e-mail) of the author(s), and title of the author(s) should not appear on the paper itself, but should be given on a separate sheet, along with an abstract of 100 words.
- Papers should be written in a clear straightforward style, avoiding technical jargon as far as possible. Papers should not exceed 5,000 words in length; bibliography/reference list is not included in word count.
- All works cited in the paper should be properly acknowledged; see referencing guidelines below. Where the paper is taken from a larger work (thesis or dissertation), it is not necessary to include all works consulted, only those cited in the paper submitted.

## **FORMAT**

- Submit paper in Word format; 1.5 line spacing, font Calibri 11 or Times New Roman 12. The use of sub-headings is recommended to enhance readability.

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- Diagrams, tables etc. should be clear, legible, and captioned (e.g. Table 1, Fig. 1) and it should be clearly indicated in the text where they are to be inserted (e.g. Fig. 1 here).
  - Any photographs or other illustrations should be sent separately, with the place where they are to be inserted clearly indicated in the text (e.g. Photo 2 here).
  - Tables and other graphics should be clear and legible, and the formatting should be kept as simple as possible. The journal may be printed in monochrome, and not in colour, so please take this into account when providing graphics, charts, and other illustrations.

## REFERENCING

All research builds upon the work of others, but use of the work of others must be fully and appropriately referenced in the text and credited to the original authors. There are many online reference generators and guides with examples of in-text citation/bibliography entries or use the 'References' feature in Word.

- <https://www.mendeley.com/guides/harvard-citation-guide>
- [www.citethisforme.com/harvard-referencing](http://www.citethisforme.com/harvard-referencing)
- <https://support.office.com/.../add-or-change-sources-citations-andbibliographies-15926...>
- [https://eulibraries.files.wordpress.com/2012/.../apa\\_word\\_2010\\_templateinstructions.do](https://eulibraries.files.wordpress.com/2012/.../apa_word_2010_templateinstructions.do).

The author, date system should be used for citations in the text, including indirect/paraphrased quotes, and page numbers given for direct quotes. Here are three examples:

- It may be that the pressure for children to achieve academic readiness impinges on the time available for play (Bergen, 2002).
- According to Rogoff (2003: 150) 'transitions across childhoods can also be considered cultural, community events' and our research clearly demonstrates this.
- If citing a website name the site/organisation, year e.g. (NCCA, 2009) not www...

Direct quotes can be short or long. They can be direct or indirect (paraphrasing);

see next section for how each is formatted/presented in-text.

## FORMAT OF QUOTES

Short quotes (3 lines of text or less) should be enclosed in quotation marks "quote", followed by author, date, and page number in brackets e.g. "Follow instructions for referencing to avoid penalties" (Murphy, 2018, p5). NOTE: Full stop comes after brackets, and not before. Longer quotes more than three lines do not have quotation marks, start on a new line, be indented from the left margin, or put in single-line spacing. Citation is the same though, i.e. must be followed by author, date, and page in brackets. Full stop after brackets.

A paper that overly relies on quoting the work of others or which does not reference cited works adequately will not be considered for publication and will be returned immediately to the author. Plagiarism in academic work can have very serious consequences. See, for example, the CIT policy on plagiarism; similar policies operate in most universities (Murphy, 2005: 37).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCE LIST

All works referred to in the text, and only those works referred to in the text, must be included in the bibliography/list of references at the end of the paper.

- This list should be in alphabetical order.
- The style preferred by An Leabhbh Óg is the Harvard or APA style of referencing.

## Examples of the Preferred Style of Referencing

### BOOKS

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roskos, K.A. and Christie, J.F. (eds.) (2000). *Play and Literacy in Early Childhood*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

### CHAPTER IN AN EDITED BOOK

Devine, D. (2009) 'Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in children's social world in school'. In S. Drudy (ed.), *Education in Ireland: Challenge and Change* (pp. 57-72) Dublin: Gill and Macmillan

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## *JOURNAL ARTICLES*

Certain, L.K. and Kahn, R.S. (2002). Prevalence, Correlates, and Trajectory of Television Viewing among Infants and Toddlers. *Journal of Paediatrics*. 109, 634-642.

Malaguzzi, L. (1993). For an Education based on Relationships. *Young Children*, 49 (1), 9-12.

## *WEBSITES / ON-LINE MATERIAL*

Bergen, D. (2002). The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1. On-line journal article, accessed 15 October 2011 at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>

Early Childhood Ireland. (2018). School Aged Childcare: A Guide to Good Practice. Accessed 28 September 2018 at <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie>

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Accessed 14 January 2013 at <http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/>

## *UNPUBLISHED THESIS*

Murphy, Mary R. (2001) Parental involvement in early years education and care in the Cork area. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University College Cork.

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Making reference to resources such as the Committee on Publication Ethics

(COPE), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) is strongly encouraged. Specific questions are always welcome and can be forwarded via email to [AnLeanbhog@OMEPIreland.ie](mailto:AnLeanbhog@OMEPIreland.ie)

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- In addition, privacy and intellectual property rights must not be violated. Sources of funding or other assistance that supported research or the development of submissions should be clearly outlined. Research guidelines regarding the ethical treatment of subjects of study, both animal and human, are required to have been followed.
- Upon discovery of any errors after submission to An Leanbh Óg, authors are expected to immediately contact the editors in order to alert them of the situation.



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The confidentiality of the editorial and review process is to be respected and fairness in all matters is expected. Any consultation with parties outside of the editorial or review process regarding a submission must be approved in advance. Our expectation is that An Leabhbh Óg editors and reviewers will contribute to maintaining the highest research practices and publication ethics.

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